


The
Gillespie Suicide
Mystery

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GILLESPIE SUICIDE MYSTERY

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By
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TO
THAT VETERAN READER OF
DETECTIVE FICTION

A. RITCHIE-SCOTT

WHO WAS KIND ENOUGH TO GLANCE THROUGH
THIS WORK WITH APPROVAL

THE GILLESPIE SUICIDE MYSTERY

CHAPTER I: *The Terrace of the Hundred Knives*

INSPECTOR COLLINS gently replaced the linen sheet over the death-set features, and turned away from the bedside. The Doctor glanced from the Inspector to the door, his eyes dropping, and together they left the room. In silence they descended the wide staircase into the hall, where a burly constable stood guarding the closed door of the library. He stepped to one side to allow the two men to enter, touching the peak of his helmet respectfully to the Inspector.

Closing the door, and standing with his back to it, Inspector Collins once more surveyed the room, snug and tastefully arranged. His gaze travelled to the open casement window at the far end and the small raised masonry terrace beyond. From below the terrace came the sound of somebody trampling to and fro on gravel.

"Bride is evidently making a thorough job of it," he said, with official pomposity. "But he won't find anything—anything contradictory, that is. Er—" he paused to clear his throat, one hand rubbing his rough chin, and went on in a manner meant to be severely businesslike—"now—er—how long, Doctor, did you say the body had been in that state—er—impaled?"

Dr Bruce leant against a table opposite the door, his hands buried deep in his trousers pockets. For

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a moment he stared hard at the carpet, his rather full lips pursed in an odd expression. Then his pale, almost colourless, eyes lifted, and stared into the Inspector's square-cut face.

"When I first examined the body I said about nine hours. We have to remember we are in October, and the night was rather cold. Yes, all things considered, I say nine hours."

The Inspector nodded, and took a turn or two up and down the room.

"Um"—he mused aloud—"nine hours. And we were here—let me see. The butler, Thorne, said he found the body as near as makes no odds at seven-thirty. That makes it——"

"It was a quarter-past eight when we turned into the grounds," the Doctor interrupted briskly, taking his watch from his pocket. "I remember looking at my watch as we passed through the gates up the drive. It's now twenty-two minutes past ten—twenty-two and a half, to be exact."

Inspector Collins fell again to rubbing his chin. He had not had time to shave that morning, and his fingers grated audibly in the day-old stubble.

"Nine hours—pretty long. But there can't be any doubt that it was an accident. That decanter bears ample testimony, and the broken glass. No, I've made a fairly good search. However, must keep a weather eye open."

The Inspector was thinking aloud. This was not a case of petty burglary. There was a body on his hands to be accounted for. Inspector Collins apparently was alive to his responsibilities.

Dr Bruce shifted his feet, and irritably arranged and rearranged his watch-chain. He was hungry, having had to forgo his breakfast. His examination

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of the body had been completed an hour since. The strictly official and decorous manner of the bullet-headed Inspector did not impress him. Collins was undoubtedly all right in his way—a very sound man—but the Doctor was beginning to feel bored by him. This was a grim affair, beyond doubt, but he had done all he could do, had said all he could say, and he felt that his time was being wasted needlessly.

There was a sharp rap at the door.

“Come in!” rumbled the Inspector.

As the newcomer entered the room a little interest lit the Doctor’s pale eyes; he ceased fumbling with his watch-chain.

Sergeant Bride saluted, and at once turned to his superior.

“Well?” the Inspector barked, his brows knitting across his nose. “What is there to report, Bride—anything?”

It was apparent then why Collins was not generally appreciated by his immediate subordinates. His tone made the Sergeant wince.

“No, sir, not a trace of anything anywhere. I’ve got Webber and Forbes still searching. Nothing new from the chauffeur or cook, and the housemaid isn’t back before this afternoon. She’s been to her mother’s in Shropshire. Miss Dane hasn’t left her room, sir.”

The Inspector took another half-turn up the room, then halted, wheeled round sharply, bent his knees, and straightened his back.

“Nothing new. Of course you’ve taken notes?”

“Yes, sir—er—of course.”

“Well, that will do, Sergeant. Inform me when Webber and Forbes arrive. Staines will have to

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remain. There will be a man here until the inquest. That's all."

"Yes, sir."

As the door closed the Inspector turned to Dr Bruce with a look of something closely approaching triumph.

"I said as much, Doctor. It's all as plain as a pikestaff. You heard the butler's story? Well, the links are obvious—and they fit. That woman—the decanter—a stroll on the terrace—suddenly loses balance—falls forward unable to save himself. That's the case in a nutshell."

The Inspector hesitated, waiting for some confirmatory comment from the other. Dr Bruce was now standing in the centre of the library, balancing on his toes, his thin hands loosely clasping and unclasping behind him.

"Well, Doctor?" suggested Collins helpfully. "Do you agree with me—or don't you?"

From his tone it seemed as though it didn't matter very much which the Doctor did. Nevertheless there was a little smile playing round the Doctor's mouth when at length he spoke.

"I must admit that sounds very ingenious, and——"

"Sounds!" The inflection showed some disturbance of the official self-complacency. One scrubby eyebrow went up a trifle, lending the Inspector's countenance a rather unpleasant expression. He drew himself up stiffly. "Of course, the logic needed to put one detail after another, and weld them into a complete and unassailable chain of evidence, is given only to those whose experience touches a wide and——"

"Yes, yes, quite." Dr Bruce had heard it all

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before, several times, and in as many differing versions; but he didn't feel prepared to stand yet another version at just that minute. Not without breakfast. But he had a point to offer, and he drove it home with little ceremony. "Oh, yes, Inspector. I have heard you often enough before to understand—perfectly. But all the same I have my doubts if the mere act of falling would have sufficient force to drive that spike clean through the man's throat, so that it would stand out a couple of inches from the back of his neck. That's a point that needs considering."

Inspector Collins did not choose to think twice about the matter.

He shrugged his shoulders at what he considered to be mere professional quibbling. He took out a little black notebook and, seating himself at the open writing-bureau, scribbled away for some fifteen minutes or so.

When he had finished he pressed a button in the wall by the side of his chair. At the moment Dr Bruce was deeply immersed in one of the finely-bound volumes which lined three of the four walls.

"Come in!" rapped out Collins, in answer to a subdued tap on the door.

The dead baronet's butler stepped noiselessly into the room. The silver-cased clock on the bureau had ticked another two minutes before the Inspector looked up at the man waiting respectfully in the centre of the room. The Doctor, he noted as he glanced upward, was still finding something engrossing in the book he had in his hands.

"Ah! Well, er—er——"

"Thorne, sir. Richard."

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"Well, Thorne, as Miss Dane is still keeping to her room I want you to learn that I have put a constable on duty here until the inquest is held. In the meantime"—he added very impressively—"you will see to it that there is no tittle-tattle from the servants' quarters. If anything should develop in my absence you will report immediately. I think that is all for the present. Kindly convey my deepest sympathy to Miss Dane in her sorrow. 'Inspector Collins, Sudley two five five one' will get me if the matter is urgent. Thank you."

When the butler had closed the door behind him the Inspector rose and walked out through the open casement on to the terrace, a singular structure raised some six feet or so above a gravel path running along that side of the house. For a moment he stood there gazing away into the distant clumps of trees and bushes.

It was October, and the air had a nip in it. The brown, naked-looking earth here and there was littered with dead, rustling leaves, havoc of the previous night's high winds. In the centre of the lawn stretching below rose one massive chestnut, impressive in its isolation; above, in its barren branches, a family of young rooks were hotly contesting their domestic rights.

Then the Inspector's eyes dropped to what at first sight appeared to be a strangely wrought stone balcony, topped with a sinister row of long, tapering iron spikes. He stood contemplating one of those spikes for quite a while, lost in speculation. It was the spike on which had been found the transfixed body of Sir Giles Gillespie.

Suddenly he roused himself at the touch of a hand on his shoulder, and turned his head. Beside him

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stood Dr Bruce, holding one of the leather-bound volumes belonging to the dead baronet's library.

"See, Collins, here's the story of that devilish parapet there—and how Sir Giles came to get it. This is his book of travels, privately printed. I've been looking over some of it. Read, Collins, read for yourself. It's most queer—infernally queer. Just down this paragraph. Here."

There was a husky note of excitement in the Doctor's voice that intrigued the Inspector. He took the book and scanned the page indicated by the Doctor's finger.

Slowly he conned the lines, and as he read down one page and passed over to the next an odd expression came into his eyes. At first they seemed worried, and then, as his interest in the matter before him grew, plainly wondering.

At length he came to the end of the paragraph the Doctor had marked for his attention. It happened to be the end of a chapter. Inspector Collins closed the book, reopened it at the title-page, ran his eye down it, and then handed it back to Dr Bruce.

"As you say, Bruce, it reads very queerly—very queerly indeed. I had no idea that Sir Giles Gillespie acquired that gruesome piece of decoration from so romantic a quarter. Often enough I've been puzzled by odd allusions to the 'Hundred Knives,' but the explanation, I see, is here." He tapped the book. "I knew, of course, that he was something of a traveller in his younger days. If I remember rightly, it was only after his father's death that he came home, settled down, and dug into business. I believe Sir Giles had small cause to regret the War . . ."

There was a contemptuous note in the Inspector's

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voice. He himself had been invalided home after Cambrai.

"No, although young Roy was out in France in December 'seventeen—under age. Got punctured in the shoulder, too. Met the fellow who tended him. He and his father never did hit it off comfortably. That's why he left, I believe."

The Inspector turned his attention for the next two seconds on the shadowed sky.

"Yes, political reasons," he murmured.

"Partly."

Inspector Collins' eyes, suddenly shrewd, were bent on the Doctor.

"You mean—there were other reasons?"

"So I have understood." Dr Bruce seemed a little uncomfortable under that fixed regard.

"Ah—so!"

As if moved by some common impulse, both men looked away at the row of dull steel spikes topping the stonework balustrade. The grim points rose to the height of a man's chest, each spike rising to some ten inches or so clear of the grey, rough stone. There were a hundred of them, as Sir Giles' book explained: seventy-six along the length of the terrace, and twelve along each side. Between each of the thin, blade-like edges was a space of about six inches.

Impaled on one of them, the body of Sir Giles Gillespie had been found by the butler, Thorne, at about half-past seven that morning. The knife-like spike had been driven clean through the baronet's throat, some two inches of the tapered steel protruding from the back of the neck. The dead man had been transfixed face downward.

All this Inspector Collins had seen for himself an

hour and a half before. He had been summoned by telephone immediately the gruesome discovery had been made. Dr Bruce had accompanied him, and now the body of the baronet lay upstairs on his bed, awaiting the coroner.

To Inspector Collins, in view of the butler's story, and after a minute examination of the library, and, again, in face of Sergeant Bride's negative report, the case appeared clear enough. He was the sort of man who, having once formed an opinion, holds to it as though to dear life. The Inspector was of that aggressive turn of mind which cannot allow itself the cool shadow of an honest doubt. It was a working axiom with him not to make a mystery out of a brick wall. Brick walls, he held, were for climbing. But though, admittedly, the Inspector possessed the qualities of a climber, being steady and unswerving, unfortunately for him and those under him the brick walls he had come across in the flat country round about Sudley Abbott had been fairly easy to surmount. He scarcely realized that such a thing as a cliff existed.

"I had heard of the spikes," said the Doctor, nodding toward the stonework. "But this is the first time I have seen them. Sir Giles never consulted anyone who couldn't show Harley Street on his card."

Inspector Collins mumbled something meant to be a response. He was busy jotting down a note in his little black book.

"And then to read that in Sir Giles' book . . ." the Doctor mused. "Yes, Inspector, they're romantic enough—as you said. Imagine those 'knives' guarding the lair of a Spanish brigand, and think of them now, cemented down as an ornament to an

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English country house. There's something deucedly odd about it. Peculiar taste, anyway."

"What exactly are you driving at, Doctor?" queried Collins, looking at the other intently.

"To be candid, I don't quite know," Dr Bruce replied, rather abstractedly, fingering the volume in his hands. "Why should a man bother to bring all this paraphernalia to England, and then set it up in an out-of-the-way place outside his library? If he fancied the stuff enough to take all that bother, wouldn't you think he'd set it up somewhere at the front of the house, where it could be seen?"

Inspector Collins pondered on this for a minute.

"You're suggesting the spikes may have held—er——?"

"Associations," said the other. "Yes."

"Associations with the past?"

"Absolutely. Associations, maybe—with Spain."

To all appearances Dr Bruce had forgotten that he had missed his breakfast. The irritated manner had gone from him. He was alert and eager. The Inspector's dark eyes flickered with growing interest.

"Are you suggesting, Bruce, that something happened there—long ago?"

"A very tentative suggestion. Go back to the paragraph in Gillespie's book. Doesn't it strike you as strange that he should be killed in the same way as those poor devils of captives who couldn't pay their ransoms? Impaled on one of those 'knives'! Perhaps—perhaps he had the thing erected outside his window here because he was a man who—believed in Fate!"

Whatever curiosity the Doctor's suggestion had aroused in the Inspector's mind faded out at that

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word. At times Dr Bruce was quite intelligent and interesting, but he had the one great fault of allowing himself to become sentimental, or, at any rate, unpractical. The Inspector coughed twice to cover his sudden annoyance and disappointment.

"Yes, it's singular—very singular," he said coldly. He wanted to say that it wasn't practical. What if Gillespie did believe in Fate? Every man does to some extent. But these medical men . . .

From beyond the belt of trees to the left came the sudden purring of a slowing motor-car. In an instant Inspector Collins was back in the library and had crossed to the door.

He stepped into the hall. Thorne was opening the huge hall door. As the door swung inward some one ran lightly up the steps and inside.

"Why—why—it's—— Yes, it's Mr Royston!"

In his surprise the butler quite failed to notice the man who had followed Royston from the car. All his attention was fixed on the athletic young man who was unbuckling the belt of his motor-coat.

"And how are you, Thorne? And the rest? Surprise, eh?"

With something of an effort the butler pulled himself together and murmured that he was all right; then his uneasy, shifting gaze travelled to the imposing figures of the Inspector and the constable behind him, standing by the open library door.

"That is, Mr Royston, there—there's been things happening, as you can see."

"Happening!" The young man's voice faltered as he saw the Inspector. "Inspector Collins! My God, then—then it's true!"

Inspector Collins' face did not move a muscle.

The young man fought hard for breath.

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"Dad! Tell me, Inspector! For God's sake tell me the worst—now!"

Collins made the effort.

"They found him this morning. We came at once. Dr Bruce here has testified that Sir Giles had been dead some nine hours. You have my sympathy, Mr Royston. But—you evidently know something. Something that perhaps may help us?"

The young man gazed mutely at the silently moving form of Dr Bruce, as that gentleman softly closed the library door behind him. Then his head sank, and the shadowed line of his mouth was drawn into a taut, thin strip of colour. His eyes were hard and fixed, glassy.

There ensued a few seconds of silence painful to all; and then the son looked up. His face was as white as the silk scarf about his neck. Little beads of perspiration stood out upon it.

"And Paula—Miss Dane?"

"Miss Dane remains in her room." The Inspector's voice sounded strained and unresponsive. His hint for information had been either ignored or unheard.

Roy Gillespie's fingers fumbled with the leather motoring-coat. The watchful Thorne came forward and drew it from his shoulders. The butler stepped back, and slowly the young man unwound the scarf from round his neck. Then with strangely steady fingers he began to fold it up.

He looked up, the deadness of pain in his eyes.

"Was it on the Spanish terrace of—the 'Hundred Knives'?"

The toneless question burst upon the silent audience with something like the devastating effect of a bombshell.

It was the Inspector who answered, after an awkward pause, choosing his words with care.

"Yes, on the terrace outside the library window, one of those 'Hundred Knives' driven through his throat!"

That was an ugly word, "driven," but the Inspector meant it to be. Not for an instant did his eyes leave the young man's face. He saw his theory melting. Suicide, or rather accidental death, as a coroner's jury would choose to distinguish it, had been his verdict. This was the first doubt other than the Doctor's mere professional quibble.

However, if Collins expected any wincing, he was disappointed. Roy Gillespie only nodded, although his jaw was set like a rock.

With lightning swiftness the Inspector tried another, a subtler move.

"To-day is your first time home for how long, Mr Royston?"

He succeeded. The question took the other completely by surprise.

"I—er—oh!" he floundered, while a grim smile spread over the Inspector's mouth. "About eighteen months—offhand. But—but why?"

Was there a trace of trepidation in that confusion? Horizontal lines showed in the Inspector's forehead. His unshaved chin jutted out aggressively.

"How did you know that your father met his death on the terrace of the 'Hundred Knives,' Sir Royston?"

It was an effective stroke. The Inspector's eyes lit up as the younger man fell back, the line of his jaw relaxing.

"How did you know?" he repeated, his voice rasping.

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Roy Gillespie tried to recover himself.

"Why, Inspector, you took me unawares then. Of course, the title's mine, I suppose—now. But it sounded strange—out of place somehow. I mean, not right. As for knowing that my father—— to say the truth—I didn't!" Then, catching a glimpse of the faces staring at him, "That is, not—not exactly!"

The grey eyes, slightly puckered, stared challengingly into the Inspector's.

"Then it was a most intriguing guess, Sir Royston!"

The young man flushed hotly. There was no overlooking the insinuation; it was too deliberate.

"As for that, Inspector," he said thickly, with a little forced laugh which failed to sound convincing, "I am not so sure—as you seem to be." After a pause, more evenly: "I certainly came prepared for—something! But although"—once more his features relaxed—"I was warned, I didn't, I—I couldn't believe it!"

It was the Inspector's turn to swallow hard. His eyes glinted ominously. He read a challenge in the other's words. Vaguely he was aware that he had somehow or other lost an advantage. Though what the advantage had been he couldn't say.

"You came prepared? Warned, you said!"

"That was what I said, Inspector. It's for you to satisfy yourself, of course. I can only say that that is why I am here."

The young man drew an envelope from his breast-pocket. He handed it to the Inspector.

"See for yourself."

Inspector Collins drew out the folded sheet of notepaper, and glanced at the few words that were

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scribbled across the pale blue tinted page. He gave a sudden start, and looked up.

"Here, Bruce, read this. And remember what I said a few minutes ago! It bears me out, eh?"

The Doctor came forward and took the letter, let his eye run down it, and handed it back to the Inspector.

"Strange" was all he had to offer. Then, turning to the young man: "Sir Royston, was your father a decided fatalist?"

Roy Gillespie shook his head.

"I can't say that he was. I shouldn't have thought so. He was always too practical and matter-of-fact. I can hardly, even now——"

He hesitated, looking at the Inspector doubtfully. But with the apparent confirmation of his own opinion the Inspector's manner had grown almost cordial.

"I am sorry if I appeared rather curt just now, Sir Royston," he said smoothly. "But, after all, it's a policeman's duty to probe—and keep probing. If you have no objection, I will retain this letter for the present. In the new light it sheds upon the case there can be no reasonable doubt left. After careful examination I had already drawn a similar deduction."

It was a new line for Inspector Collins to be taking, but he was imagining an advantage in the handling of this case if he could ingratiate himself with the new baronet. He refolded the letter and placed it back in its envelope.

Until that moment none had given any attention to the man who had followed Sir Royston from the car. The Inspector was about to slip the letter into his pocket when the stranger asserted his presence.

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He put a restraining hand on the Inspector's arm. Collins wheeled about, and found himself looking into a pair of remarkably inscrutable eyes.

"Er—oh—I beg your pardon, sir!"

Silently the stranger held out his hand for the letter.

After the first moment's surprise Collins became his old official self—aloof, suspicious, eyeing the newcomer warily.

"May I beg leave to inquire your purpose, Mr—er——"

Without more ado the stranger deftly slipped a card into the Inspector's hand, and stood back, politely regarding the ceiling.

Inspector Collins of the County Police sniffed audibly, then gurgled faintly. The hand which held the little slip of pasteboard shook. In neat characters, the inscription read:

ANTHONY SLADE

Dept. X 2,

New Scotland Yard

The newcomer must have known every inch of the ceiling by heart before the Inspector recovered poise enough to draw himself up to his full dignified height. There was something desperate in the Inspector's calm.

"Sir Royston, this is Mr Slade of Scotland Yard." With a wave of the hand, "Sir Royston Gillespie."

The stranger nodded shortly, lowering his gaze. After a moment in which he seemed almost to panic the baronet cried:

"Why, I—I'm extremely sorry, Mr Slade! I

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must apologize. I forgot all about you waiting, seeing the Inspector here. You see," he went on to the mystified officer, "I picked Mr Slade up in my car just this side of Jallop's Farm. He said he was on his way here."

"Oh—yes!" rumbled the Inspector, without the slightest show of enthusiasm. "Pleased to meet you, Mr Slade, I'm sure. Any service I can be, please let me know. Quite a surprise, a Yard man here."

The newcomer passed over the opportunity provided for explaining his presence, contenting himself with offering his hat to Thorne. He remained standing in his overcoat.

"Inspector Collins? Very glad to meet you, Inspector. I'd like a look at the letter Sir Royston handed you. Thank you."

He unfolded the sheet the Inspector grudgingly passed him, and read:

DEAR ROYSTON,

I am writing this with a strange presentiment that very soon I shall meet my end, and by my own hand. I cannot find peace save at night, when I retire to my terrace of the "Hundred Knives," alone with my thoughts and memories.

My love to you, Roy, and the hope that you are fit.

Your affectionate father,

GILES GILLESPIE

Detective Inspector Slade handed the letter back to Inspector Collins with the non-committal comment of "Very interesting," felt in an inside pocket of his overcoat, and drew out another envelope, which he handed to the latter for his perusal.

The letter, dated the previous day, like the other,

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was of the same mauve-blue tint, and was addressed to the Commissioner of Police, Scotland Yard:

DEAR SIR,

To-day I have reached the conclusion of a problem which has been plaguing me now for many weeks. To-night I take the final step. It will be too late for interference. I am not a crank. Please don't think that. Neither am I at all mentally defective. But I am a man who has at long last found a courage he has always been seeking. I intend to kill myself. Enclosed is a doctor's certificate of my health for June last.

I am,

Yours very truly,

GILES GILLESPIE, *Bart.*

The Yard man took the envelope from Inspector Collins in silence. He replaced it in his pocket. Then:

"I have to make a report," he explained. "I suppose everything is as you found it?"

The Inspector inclined his head a couple of inches, and gave a brief summary of what had taken place. He regarded this peremptory intrusion on what he considered as his personal department with cold disfavour. He saw himself being slowly but surely shelved.

Detective Inspector Slade turned to the baronet.

"With your permission, Sir Royston, I'll begin my examination at once."

"Pray do. The whole house and the servants are at your disposal, Mr Slade. Lunch, I believe, is at twelve-thirty—isn't it, Thorne?"

The butler, still holding the baronet's coat and the detective's hat, murmured a low assent, and crossed to a small lounge opening upon the opposite

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side of the hall. His exit was taken as a signal that the interview was ended.

Inspector Collins and the Doctor politely declined the new baronet's invitation to lunch on the ground of urgent affairs awaiting them in the town, and took their leave. Outside they found Sergeant Bride and his men standing by. The constables had completed their search of the grounds some twenty minutes before, but had found nothing new. Collins, in no very gay mood, gave the word, and they scrambled into the police car.

Meanwhile Anthony Slade had picked up the green leather attaché-case he had deposited in the hall and had passed into the library, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER II: *Slade Decides to Stay On*

THE lunch was a very quiet one, Slade and his host partaking of the meal together in the large dining-room, made cheerful by the flicker and crackle of a well-banked fire. Miss Dane, the late Sir Giles' ward, had sent word begging to be excused. Her maid reported that she continued in a state of collapse, utterly unstrung by the fearful discovery.

Sir Royston, Slade thought, took this piece of information more concernedly than one would have expected. Now that Collins had gone the baronet was beginning to show deeper signs of feeling. He did not speak of his father, but the detective shrewdly guessed that his thoughts were dwelling on the previous night's tragedy. A chance remark here and there, an allusion by the attentive Thorne to some existing domestic arrangement, and the young man's broken responses, confirmed the detective's conclusions. Gillespie, left to himself, was taking it hard. Slade was at pains to veer what little conversation ensued to subjects more remote.

As soon as he could decently excuse himself the host retired to the room which had been hastily prepared for him. Left to his own resources, Anthony Slade made his way back to the library, shut himself in, settled himself down in one of the deep-bottomed armchairs, and, lighting his pipe, let his thoughts gradually fix on the examination he had made before lunch.

Slade Decides to Stay On

It was his peculiar way of searching for cunningly hid truths. He did not believe in, and never practised, concentrating his thoughts to order. Such a process long continued, he held, resulted in a progressive coarsening of the finer parts of the brain's deductive mechanism. Rather did he prefer to wait patiently until he found his mind tuned to the right receptive key. Then he would start to think systematically, exerting himself, until he caught a glimpse of a path to that for which he sought. Thinking had reached a fine art with Anthony Slade. He had solved the secret not only of concentration of thought, but of adaptation. He was consequently the severest critic of himself.

It was strenuous work and hard; and it as often as not meant many hours seemingly wasted. Not always did he find his mind attuned aright. The perfect balance was easily shifted. But the file-case containing the record of Anthony Slade's investigations in the office of the Criminal Investigation Department bore ample testimony to the ultimate efficiency of his method. And in Slade's work it was efficiency that counted.

For several minutes he puffed idly, watching with upturned face and vacant eyes the lazy blue clouds floating above his head. Then suddenly the light in his eyes grew keener, his chin sank low on his chest, and, as though under the influence of some will stronger than his own, he appeared to brood over the crackling embers in his pipe-bowl.

The fingers of one hand at odd intervals drummed on the heavily padded arm of his chair. Once his nostrils stretched wide, like those of a highly mettled horse responding to the extra urge of a clever

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horseman, and his indrawn lips sucked noisily at the warm stem.

After some three-quarters of an hour of such concentration he rose and pulled himself together. His mouth was tucked tight at the corners, a sure sign with Slade that there was something to do before he could put his mind at rest; something to make sure of. With a few taps he emptied his cold pipe, refilled it and lit it, and once more unlocked his green leather attaché-case.

He took out three articles: a piece of wash-leather, a compact folding-lens, and a bunch of small-designed skeleton keys.

His first attention was paid to the writing-bureau. It was of a standardized pattern, modern, of oak, rather large of its kind, allowing the writer ample room for his knees, but in no other way outstanding.

The detective gave his lens a few preliminary rubs with the wash-leather, then bent over the inkstand. However, the powerful glass revealed nothing save a few specks of dust and some untidy ink-blobs. He passed over the blotting-pad. It was a new, clean sheet, unsoiled as yet.

For a moment he stood tapping his teeth with the handle of the lens. He was thinking of those letters. The one addressed to Scotland Yard had been penned with a fine nib. The one Inspector Collins had shown him, that which Sir Giles had sent to his son, was also written with a fine-pointed pen. But there was this essential difference between the two: that whereas the characters of the one addressed to Scotland Yard were all even in line and tone, those of the one received by the son were slightly blotchy, slightly thicker and darker at the bottom than at the top. To Slade's trained eye it had been obvious at

once. One—that addressed to the Yard—had been written with an ordinary pen. The other had been written with a fountain-pen. The former also, from the appearance of the words, had been blotted. The other had not. This rather indicated that one or the other had been written as an afterthought. Which?

Slade felt he would like to know. Why had they not been written together? They had certainly been posted together. He had made a point of looking at the postmarks in each case.

To satisfy a growing curiosity Slade wanted to see those two pens.

The one was resting before his eyes. It was a fine, scratchy nib. He tried it first on a piece of paper from his pocket, to clear it of any corrosion. Then, producing the letter from his overcoat, he drew a couple of upward- and downward-slanting strokes in the blank top corner. At the third attempt he managed to write with something like the right pressure. He held the letter under his lens. The strokes were identical. The test was not infallible, but it was something of a start. Incidentally it gave him an insight into the character of the dead man. He had often summed up a man's character by his handwriting, and was inclined to think Sir Giles had been a man of artistic temperament, rather weak, yet consequential.

That was point No. 1 verified.

He took a stiff manilla envelope from his case and slipped the pen into it. Then he tried the drawers of the bureau, but, like the pigeon-holes, they contained little save odd envelopes and supplies of notepaper. In one of them was a magazine of the 'yellow' variety and a few loose scented cigarettes.

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One of these Slade enveloped, together with a couple of cigarette-stubs and some burnt matches he extracted from the ornate grate, and placed the envelope in his attaché-case.

After relocking the drawers he turned to the sideboard, still littered with the decanter and the glasses of the night before.

Only one glass had been used. Its remains reposed on a slip of paper on the silver tray, where the Inspector had placed them after collecting the fragments from the terrace. Slade's inquiring eyes passed to the whisky decanter. His conclusion was the obvious one, the same to which the Inspector had been led. The decanter itself was an exquisite piece of workmanship, Continental, of cut glass, lipped and inlaid with silver tracing. The finely turned mouth gaped unstoppered. Sir Giles must have been a rare toper, he mused thoughtfully, thinking of those steady pen-strokes, the while glancing over the sideboard for the missing stopper. There was just enough whisky left in the decanter to cover the bottom. But the siphon had been practically ignored, not more than the third part of a wineglass having been drawn off. A rare toper!

Perhaps this was the secret he, Sir Giles, had been hunting, the secret which had finally given him enough courage to kill himself!

This seemed to be as plain a case of suicide as Slade had professionally encountered. Sir Giles himself had made it all so plain. And yet . . .

He moved across the room to the window casement, examining the floor closely. At the window he paused, and bent closer. For the space of a couple of feet, where the carpet did not cover the polished flooring, immediately before the window,

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ran a couple of faint lines, as if somebody had dragged . . .

He peered closer, using his lens. Then suddenly he rose and walked out on to the terrace, his face set and grave. Once more he went over the terrace with its grim balcony of the so-called "Hundred Knives," and once again he found nothing except a few more minute splinters of the glass which Inspector Collins had not gathered up. As he straightened his back a large spot of rain struck cold against his forehead. He glanced up. The sky was of a dark leaden colour; the high-blown clouds of the morning had closed in, and now hung menacing.

The detective judged he had just about time to do what he wanted to without getting soaked.

Holding to the wall with the flat of his hands, he vaulted lightly on to the parapet, his right foot balanced between two of the dangerous-looking 'knives.' Then he dropped over on to the hard soil some ten feet beneath the parapet.

For ten minutes he searched the surrounding few yards of bushes and leaf-scattered ground against the house and the uneven stretch of gravel path running along the outward base of the terrace. Meanwhile the raindrops fell faster. By the time Slade came to the last little clump of shrubs to the left of the library terrace tiny rivulets of the rain-water were streaming down his face and neck. He poked about for a minute or two, and was about to give it up when his foot trod on something hard and round under some wet leaves. He stepped back and stooped lower to brush them aside. As he did so he caught a faint yet decided reek of spirit. Under the loose-lying layer of leaves the earth was moist, although

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as yet, being under the shelter of some of the small, scrubby bushes, the rain had not percolated. He scraped some of it together in his fingers and held it to his nose. Yes, he thought so—whisky. Unmistakable! The damp earth in his hand stank of it.

And then he came upon what he was looking for, what he had trodden on—a cut-glass stopper.

Slade made his way back to the hall *via* the servants' quarters, and turned aside for a hasty wash and brush up in the small cloakroom which opened out of the lounge.

Fifteen minutes later he again crossed the hall to the library. Outside, seated reading a newspaper one of the servants had given him, was the constable Inspector Collins had left in charge. As Slade approached he rose and touched his helmet.

"I thought you were in there, sir. At least, I didn't see you come out."

The man's tone was half apologetic, half bewildered. But he evidently had something to say. Slade motioned to him to continue.

"Well, constable, and what is it?"

"Nothin' much, sir. 'Cep' that butler feller; he wanted to go in. He knocked, but you didn't answer. After knockin' three times he opened the door an' walked in. I just got up an' waited, in case you called. I thought his goin' in there was all right, you bein' in there too. But if you weren't in there, perhaps I'd better tell you. All he did in there was ter arrange the glasses on the sideboard. Then he went out. That's all."

"Rearranged the glasses on the sideboard?" queried Slade, a little dubious.

"Yes, sir, that was all. Then he went out."

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The detective thanked him and passed inside, followed by the constable's wide, staring eyes. It was not often that a Yard man was seen in Sudley Abbott.

Whatever his purpose, the butler had rearranged the glasses and the bowl of fruit on the sideboard. But the thing that interested Slade was the fact that the decanter was now stoppered. He took out the new stopper and examined it. It was one of those heavy, cumbrous glass affairs usually associated with cheap dressing-table sets. Held away from the finely worked decanter, and compared, it was almost ludicrous.

Thoughtfully Slade put the stopper back in the mouth of the decanter. Then he seated himself at the bureau, and after several minutes' silent tapping of his fingers on the open leaf he pressed the button.

Two minutes later the butler entered, suave and sleek, to find Slade apparently absorbed in the catalogue volume of the late baronet's library.

Slade looked round on hearing a discreet but slightly impatient cough.

"Ah, Thorne," he said warmly, closing the volume, "I wonder whether you could give me a few details before I go upstairs. After that I'll be moving on."

He gave the butler the full benefit of his most expansive smile. Slade's methods of dealing with things and people were somewhat the opposite of Inspector Collins'.

The butler, under that smile, appeared to thaw. Slade's eyes, however, grew keener at this symptom, and his ears were cocked for each tiny inflection of the man's voice.

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"To tell the truth, sir, there's very little I can say, as I told the Inspector this morning——"

"Yes, quite so, I can see that," interrupted the detective, who had no wish to be classed with the Inspector in the man's mind. "But there are one or two points I'd like to clear up. I want to catch the six-fifteen back to King's Cross, which doesn't leave me with overmuch time."

He paused to let that sink in. The butler bent his head, his eyes dropping.

"How long, Thorne, have you been with Sir Giles?"

"Ever since I was invalided home, sir."

"When was that?"

"March—'fifteen."

Slade nodded.

"That was when you came to Sudley Abbott?"

"Not exactly, sir. You see, Sir Giles saw me in a London hospital that he was visiting, and I was a curious case at the time."

"Oh, how was that?"

"Well, you see, sir, I was one of the first as was gassed. It pretty well messed me up, and everything for me. And on Sir Giles learning that I was unfit for further service, and offering to take me under his wing, as you might say, in a manner of speaking, I was moved down here. But that was some weeks afterwards, when they finally decided that I couldn't go back there. Nerves and heart. Full discharge came when I was down here. First week."

Again Slade nodded—slower this time. He was trying to recall the early months of 1915. All he could remember at the moment was mud and a rat that he had watched drown in a shellhole, the word having been passed along to hold fire.

"What regiment?"

"Er—Bedfords, sir."

The pause before answering was of the slightest, but it was enough for Slade. The man had had to consider his reply.

"Well, now, Thorne, to get back to points before us. Would you say that Sir Giles was a heavy drinker?"

"No—well, that depends." He seemed to check himself abruptly, but Slade noticed the absence of confusion in his manner. "He might 'a been, according to some people's notions, that is. And again, he might not. He certainly liked his glass—with all respect to him, sir. He were a good master. I'll say that to anyone's face, sir. But come to think of it, there were times—and lately, sir—when he—well, when he, one might say, indulged! But no disrespect, sir! No disrespect!"

"Have you ever known him intoxicated?"

"If you mean, sir, do I ever remember the night when he couldn't get himself to bed, then—no, I don't!"

"You say he had been drinking rather more than usual lately?"

"Yes, sir. Since he withdrew from an active partnership in his town business."

"And when was that?"

"About the end of July, I believe, sir. I couldn't tell you to the exact day."

As he spoke Slade was taking rapid stock of the man's build, features, and stance. He appeared to be a man of fair breeding, and his speech, despite sundry flagrant blemishes, was low and modulated. There was an air of natural refinement about him that the detective realized was of the kind that

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is not cultivated, but which is inborn. Richard Thorne was proving to be an all-round interesting personality. Although he found the man's manner intriguing his curiosity, Slade was nevertheless compelled to admit to himself that he was not disagreeably impressed. There was a something about the man—he could not define it—that he did not dislike. Perhaps it was the sense of poise about the man; perhaps it was not. He could not say. Still, Anthony Slade was not the type of man who would let personal liking interfere with an investigation.

"I see—I see." And then, as though a new thought had struck him: "Had Sir Giles written many letters during the past few months, Thorne?" And as an afterthought: "I suppose you collected what there was for the post?"

As the butler answered Slade could have sworn that the man's eyes twinkled. They were steady, hazel eyes, not given to flickering.

"No, sir, the master used to post his letters hisself. It was his regular walk after his afternoon nap—I mean doze, sir. The postman, they used to say, gave him five minutes' grace—then walked down with him. He was sure of a glass then. After his stroll the master generally came back and changed for dinner. He still went up to London once a fortnight or so to settle accounts and things."

"I suppose so. Was he very particular about the arrangement of his desk?"

"Not over particular, sir."

"Being a man accustomed to business routine, I suppose he preferred a clean pen and a new sheet of blotting-paper to be set out each morning, eh?"

"That happens to—to be the case, sir. I used

to—to think it peculiar at first, not bein' used to his ways. But, if you don't mind me sayin' so, sir, I don't quite——”

Before he could get out what he was wanting to say the detective dropped the book he was holding on the bureau and faced round with another question. The tone in which he spoke implied that he had finished with preliminaries.

“Now, I want, briefly, a summary of what took place last night—as far as you are able to give it me.”

There was no mistaking the quality of the words. The man took one quivering intake of breath, drew his feet together, jerked his chin up, and replied:

“The first thing that drew my attention as out of the usual, sir, was after his stroll into the town, when he told me he expected a visitor in the evening some time—a woman . . .”

In a soft, slow voice the man told how his master for some unknown reason had appeared unduly agitated that evening, and had been constantly ringing down before dinner to inquire if the expected visitor had arrived. The dinner-hour was early—six-thirty. At about twenty minutes past seven o'clock, as near as he could tell, a closed car had driven up to the hall door. The driver, a woman whose face had been concealed in a large fur motoring-ruff, he had shown at once into the library. Sir Giles had not rung again until a quarter-past ten. He, Thorne, had seen the woman to her car, and had then returned to his master. Sir Giles when he had entered the library was standing in the centre of the room. Staring through the casement into the night, he had remained with his back to the butler until the latter asked if there was anything he could do

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before retiring. His master had wheeled round at the sound of Thorne's voice, and with a strange smile on his face had asked him what he considered to be the surest remedy for a sore throat!

"There was a light in his eyes at the time which made me wonder when I got into bed. It was just as though they were afire, sir, smoulderin' like. Red, that's what they were then—flashin' red!"

Slade's eyes were on the other's face as he spoke, spreading his hands wide in some emphatic gesture—neat, well-kept hands, Slade noticed—or shaking his head and wrinkling his scrubby moustache as the recollection of the dead man's glance came back to him. The detective did not interrupt. He was content to let the man tell his own tale in his own way.

Thorne went on to say that after he had said something about a little warm oil the baronet had laughingly dismissed him for the night and settled himself down in an armchair with the reading-lamp drawn close.

The next thing of any importance Thorne knew was when, at seven-thirty that morning, his usual time, he had opened the library door and entered to rearrange the sideboard and bureau and pull back the windows if the air was not too cold. The baronet had always left the leaf of his bureau down, and was never called before eight o'clock, when he breakfasted with his ward.

That completed the man's story.

There was little or nothing to be obtained from the other servants, who had kept to their own region of the house, and none of whom had noted anything out of the ordinary in the leisurely procedure of the day's affairs. The chauffeur, after picking up the

baronet at the Sudley Hotel, where the baronet's afternoon ramble into the town had terminated, had retired to bed with a cold in his head. The cook had sat up till twenty minutes past ten with the latest volume from the town chemist's circulating library.

Slade passed upstairs with his overcoat and green attaché-case to his survey of the body in a thoughtful and puzzled mood. What there was of evidence was all very scrappy and loose. If several links fitted, the connexions were not yet apparent. The woman, for instance . . . And yet, his worldly reason insisted, why not?

He found himself wondering what the butler thought of it all, what Collins thought, what the constable down belowstairs thought. What he himself thought. What was he thinking? What was it he was trying not to think?

With deft yet gentle fingers he uncovered the still form lying in its clothes, and raised the heavy head. Through his lens he examined the jagged wound. The neck was swollen, and the features appeared bloated and puffed. The crumpled collar and bow had been removed, and the open shirt-front revealed the dark colour of the flesh.

The day was drawing in, and the light was failing. Slade took a small electric lamp from his case and turned its brilliant ray on the cold flesh. His glass showed clearly the dry pores in the skin, the closed lip of the wound in the throat, and the dark circle round it where the pressure had . . .

Just beneath the wound the flesh, when smoothed out with finger and thumb, showed a yellowish-green in two patches, where the wind-pipe . . .

Slade did a curious thing. He crossed the room, switched on the light, and noiselessly drew the blind.

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Then, walking round to the head of the bed, he stooped down and brought both hands forward over the dead baronet's throat. He noticed that the short hairs on the nape of the neck were dyed a dark brown, matted with the blood that had dried after Dr Bruce had cleansed the head.

Slade's next move was more understandable. He set about carefully and minutely overhauling the clothes remaining on the body. Each article in turn received a close scrutiny. It took some time, and once or twice he paused to fold his arms and contemplate the rigid, peaceful form. But at last it was done, the hands and finger-nails examined, and several fairly distinct prints taken on the inked pad in his pocket. The white linen sheet was replaced.

His work there completed, Slade quickly rinsed his hands and dried them on the towel at the washhand-stand, then drew up the blind, switched off the light, and passed outside into the corridor.

Downstairs he found Sir Royston in his motoring-coat. He was reading a letter he had just received. Hearing some one behind him, he looked up.

"Ah, Mr Slade! Thorne said you hadn't gone yet. Here's a letter addressed to my father. I can't make head or tail of it. I've got to call at the chemist's for something for Miss Dane, so I'll take the letter to Collins straightaway. He'd better see it, I suppose. Here you are, you can read it for yourself while I slip round for the car. Getting back now? Oh, right-o! Thorne, Mr Slade's hat, please. Shan't be a moment."

He moved off, leaving Slade to tumble into his overcoat and glance over the letter. As the detective read it for the third time a puzzled frown appeared between his eyes. The short note ran as follows:

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I had made up my mind before I left. The cash—or I start the ball rolling. And remember this, I'm not one to be played with. If I do start it rolling, depend upon it that it'll get a good send off! I'm safe, mind that. And I'm not forgetting. You can't get at me—and you'd be worse than a fool to try to frame me. But I won't take a penny less to keep my mouth shut. And I can holler when I like—believe me! If you are wise you'll take this as final—and pay!

There was no signature or sign appended. Just the draggled scrawl. Slade turned the letter over in his hand and sniffed it.

Blackmail! Lilac!

The two thoughts flashed through Slade's mind simultaneously. There was a faint aroma about the paper—strong enough, however, for the detective to recognize. And the flourishing scrawl. Only a woman or a schoolboy could have penned it. Obvious reasons suggested the former.

At that moment the butler returned with his hat. The letter had reminded Slade of something.

"Oh, Thorne," he said, as the butler turned away, "there's one thing more I should like to ask you. Do you know if Sir Giles used a fountain-pen?"

For a second or two the man appeared to ruminate.

"No, sir, I can't say as I ever do remember his using one. But I happen to have one myself, if it's something you——"

"No, no, thanks. It was just a small point. But Sir Giles' notepaper—perhaps you can help me there. Was it purchased in Sudley Abbott or in London?"

This time there was no hesitation. Thorne seemed honestly eager to assist.

"In Sudley Abbott, sir—at Wyford's in Queen

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Street. The big stationer's shop next to the bank, corner of Queen's Mews."

Slade nodded.

"Excellent. I—er——"

He stepped closer to the man as the hall door swung back and Roy Gillespie entered.

Both men scrambled into the car, and Gillespie switched on the powerful headlights. The rain had stopped, but through the darkness sounded the incessant plash of the raindrops from the bare branches of the reeking trees. A low breeze was moaning. The baronet let in the clutch, and the car gave a lurch forward. Neither of the men in it had seen the queer, grim expression on the butler's face as he had turned to go in, slipping into his pocket the two half-crowns the detective had managed to transfer unseen.

Nor had they seen a black, silently moving figure, with a large felt hat pulled down low over its face, rise from a clump of dripping evergreens by the porch-side, bound up the steps four at a time, and clutch the butler's arm in a grip like a vice before he could step inside, wheel the staggered man round face to face, and draw him into the shadow.

In the distance came the sound of grinding brakes. The baronet was swerving into the highroad.

Gillespie dropped the detective at the post-office, and drove off. Slade entered, drew out a telegram form and filled it in, and pushed it and two shillings under the wire framework of the counter.

Then he lit his pipe, glanced at the post-office clock and compared it with his wrist-watch, and, picking up his attaché-case, walked out and turned in the direction of the station. However, he turned aside after some five minutes' walk along, and

entered the inviting swing-doors of the Sudley Hotel. He engaged a room, preferring to pay cash down, and half an hour later was seated toasting his toes at a cheerful blaze in a cosy little bed-sitting-room. He had finished his dinner, the things had been cleared away, and he was striking a second match when a discreet tap sounded at the door.

The maid handed him a telegram. He looked at his watch and smiled. Six minutes to seven. Just in time.

As the door closed he tore open the brown envelope and unfolded the form inside.

Go ahead stop report soon as possible stop postmark noted stop brawley sifting stop W S W.

A little grin of satisfaction played round Slade's mouth as he pocketed the slip and picked up the book lying open on his lap.

"Brawley's all right," he murmured to the fire. "He'll get her if anyone can." His long, tapered fingers drummed on the chair-arm. "She's no beginner . . ."

He drew his chair closer to the fire, poked a flaring coal with his toe, settled back, and prepared to give his whole attention to the volume which several hours previously had wrung from Inspector Collins the grudging compliment of reading "very queerly indeed."

CHAPTER III: *The Ferret*

Cherchez la femme! Slade afforded himself a smile at the thought. Such had always been the dominant note of the detective stories he had read. But it only went to show how little the authors knew of criminal women. Stories very well worked out, ingeniously planned, they all allowed any villain in them just enough rope to hang himself—enough, that is, to last through some three hundred odd pages before the jerk on the noose came. But a woman, that was another matter. The writers invariably lost their heads about their women crooks, endowed them with subtler propensities. A woman complicated in one of their pen-and-ink crimes had to be sought after, hunted, tracked down—there were a number of terms, all equally fascinating, to choose from. No matter how much rope they were given, these lady criminals, they all seemed to have learnt to skip jolly well in the more regenerate days of their youth.

Cherchez la femme! Slade's smile broadened as he turned into Queen Street. He had begun the morning auspiciously. Following an appetizing breakfast, he had satisfactorily concluded an interview with Mr Thomas Blainger, postman and sorter at the Sudley Abbott General Post Office.

As he walked the detective allowed himself the pleasure of a little speculation on trivialities, prior to making another piece of investigation. And at

the moment he was pleased to be considering the very amateurish foible of those detectives in fiction who wasted valuable time in hunting the "woman in the case" when they should have been profitably following fresh-laid trails.

Experience had taught Slade a great deal. By temperament he was a man who set himself habitually to profit by the daily whys and wherefores he found himself called upon to elucidate. It was a source of personal gratification to him that of the many cases of his career there was none from which he had not learnt something to help him materially in the next. Just lately he had come off the sensational case of the French-Canadian dwarf Perorcqué, who had proved himself to be a malformed edition of the devil. The dwarf had all but won clear with a hundred and sixty thousand pounds' worth of rubies, stock property of the North Mogok and Western Burma Mines Syndicate, after slitting the throats of two armed watchmen, when Slade had placed a hand upon his shoulder and poked an automatic under his nose at the Gare Saint-Lazare. The filing of that extradition warrant had made success a matter of seconds only. The Chief had handed Slade this present job much as he would have given him a holiday jaunt. The detective knew very well what he had to tackle when he got back—the gang of coiners who were successfully planting their spurious ware in every large commercial town from Bristol to Liverpool. Not as yet had the gang been daring enough to attempt the metropolis itself, but the unsuccessful efforts of the provincial police and the outstanding boldness with which the *coups* were carried out had at length necessitated the interference of headquarters.

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Slade entered a tobacconist's to replenish his depleted pouch. He took the opportunity offered to refill his pipe and light up. Yes, he thought, smiling the while at the pleasant-mannered lady assistant who had proffered the match, those writers of detective fiction were certainly at fault when it came to dealing with women. They took too much trouble with them. And when you once begin to let a woman know that you are taking notice of her you might as well call off. She gets flattered and out of control. You don't need to give a woman any rope with which to hang herself. Just let her alone. She'll give herself away sooner or later, as he had found. More often than not it was sooner. With a man, of course, it was impossible. Let him bide—and he'll be working every minute to cover his tracks. But a woman—no. She goes along all right up to a certain point. When she reaches this she must either scream—or start travelling back. In either case the result is much the same. Of course, there were some, he knew, who had never been convicted, and who never would be, precisely because they knew where they stood, what the police were waiting for. In other words, they were skipping with the generous amount of rope that had been doled out.

As he once more turned up the street he thought of the women in this case.

There were two. One certainly—it was on the cards both—he knew, was going to figure pretty prominently. But he was not worrying. Brawley could go on keeping his eyes open, but she would do the rest all in good time. As for the other . . . He reflected upon the strange concern evinced by his host of the day before. Although he had never

seen her, he thought that there was something about Paula Dane which he knew—and very few others besides. It had not taken much insight to read between the lines. If the new baronet and Sir Giles' ward were lovers, then there was nothing that could explain their keeping the affair secret other than an opposition from Sir Giles himself. The young man had admitted to Collins that he had not been home for a year and a half. Obviously things had not gone smoothly at Greystones.

He was still musing upon the grey, gaunt house and its inmates, and the grim, cruel-looking "Terrace of the Hundred Knives," when he found himself crossing the small alley-way called Queen's Mews. A few steps past the bank on the corner, and he pushed open the drop-handle door of Messrs Wyford and Sons, Printers and Stationers, and strolled up to the deserted counter.

A courteous assistant approached and inquired what he could do for the detective. Slade said he wanted to see the manager on some urgent matter. After a rapid glance to ascertain whether the detective was a possible applicant for a job, and as rapid a decision on the contrary, the assistant murmured "Certainly," and moved away.

In a few seconds he returned and asked the detective to step into the small office at the far end of the shop.

Slade entered, removed his hat, nodded affably to the podgy, middle-aged man who swung round in his chair, and at once made known his business. Observing, as he spoke, a discreet smile spreading over Mr Kenneth Wyford's florid face, the detective stopped short and handed him a card. That helped matters considerably. The gentleman was duly

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impressed with a sense of things fitting—looked a trifle hurt when the detective declined one of his fattest of broad-banded cigars—but rallied sufficiently to tell Slade all he wanted to hear in about three minutes by the Dutch-faced clock hanging over the fireplace.

Yes, Messrs Wyford had for years now supplied Sir Giles Gillespie with his stationery, and occasionally undertook some small piece of private printing. He trusted they had not printed anything of a nature likely to—— Ah, that was all right, then! Yes, Sir Giles had entered the shop yesterday afternoon, somewhere about four-thirty, he believed. He personally had been at tea. The baronet had suddenly remembered a note he had forgotten to write. An assistant had supplied him with notepaper and envelope, and he had penned the few lines with his, Mr Kenneth Wyford's, own pen.

Slade scribbled a few lines himself with the heavily mounted pen the manager handed him, put the piece of paper in his pocket, laid the pen down on the walnut desk, and rose. Mr Kenneth Wyford's squat figure grunted as he propped himself on his feet to shake hands.

Was there anything——?

Ah, very good then. Good——

The thin-faced assistant closed the shop door after Slade as the detective once more stepped out into the thin October sunlight.

Mr Thomas Blainger had evidently told the truth. He had walked with Sir Giles as far as Wyford's, and Sir Giles had written another letter there—the one received by Scotland Yard. The afterthought.

A street-car had just rattled itself to a pause.

Slade scrambled aboard. At the end of Old Town Road he alighted, crossed the road, and passed between the portals of a flat-faced building fronted with two square blue lamps.

Sergeant Bride, trained to the official whimsies of his station inspector, affected not to recognize the visitor who had put his chief so much out of countenance.

Slade was kept kicking his heels a cool seventeen minutes before a constable ushered him into the unprepossessing room where Inspector Collins appeared to be engaged with a heaped-up pile of correspondence.

Luckily for Slade it was not the first time he had been called upon to hold his feelings in check under the pettiness of provincial police officials. The smile he gave the Inspector was by no means melting, but it was certainly genial.

"Good morning, Inspector," he opened warmly, tactfully ignoring the seventeen minutes' wait in the cold outer office. "Been at work on the Gillespie affair, I suppose. Nothing startling, I presume?"

Spoken in any other tone, and coming from any other man than Slade, the words would have been more than the Inspector could have stomached. As it was, smothering his annoyance at the detective's reappearance, the Inspector merely spread his hands depreciatingly upon the desk, and inclined his head, his mouth twisting to one side in a sickly smile, as though operated by a string from the ear.

Slade judged from that smile what kind of answer he was likely to receive, and, to save atmospheric tension, forestalled it.

"You've been making inquiries about the letter

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Sir Royston brought you yesterday—the one addressed to his father?”

As Slade spoke the Inspector's smile changed to that of a man who is comforted by foreknowledge. He elected to treat the matter airily; but the detective perceived from the man's irritability that if he could have refused to speak, point-blank, he would have done so.

“Yes, Mr Slade, we certainly made inquiries upon that line—and also upon others.”

It was a hint; the man could not check himself. Official pride has a way of rankling even when satisfaction is forthcoming. Slade continued to look impressed. Collins and his men had learnt something. He wanted to know what.

For a second or two Slade's grey eyes blinked mildly at the curved legs of the high desk. Then he looked up, a bland expression on his face.

“You are to be congratulated, Inspector. I found one or two things myself—an empty decanter, almost empty, that is; fragments of broken glass—other fragments than those you found; a book of travels, Sir Giles' own, very strange, too . . .”

He paused to blow his nose vigorously. Inspector Collins' smile was by now very arch. If the truth be told, he was wondering at what he had found in Slade the day before to be so formidable. Indeed, the detective was showing up to be peculiarly gullible. Judging by the man they had sent down, the Yard hadn't thought much of this case. As Slade continued the Inspector's smile expanded, grew to dimensions almost patronizing.

“. . . And I made several inquiries in the town—his habits, and so forth. But nothing very much came of them. Nothing helpful. In fact . . .”

Again he paused, this time uneasily. The Inspector was twiddling his thumbs, enjoying himself.

He took a deep breath before he spoke.

"Yes, yes"—the abrupt gesture of his large red hand indicated commencement and conclusion all in one—"pure routine—pure routine work. Our researches, of course, extended over a wider area. It was to be expected. Systematic concentration upon individual factors. An item here and there—links—and the ultimate result."

Slade looked crushed. His eyes showed watery from excessive blinking. Their habitual keen light was diluted with rising moisture.

"Ah! You're on something! You have come on something with a bearing on the case. Perhaps a solution?"

In his bated voice wonder and hope were subtly mingled.

Collins' glance was almost pitying. He was not the man to give himself away altogether. But he felt that he could afford to be crushing in this instance. His position demanded it.

"You are right, Mr Slade. We found several things which interested us. I might almost say intrigued us immensely."

Slade gave the impression of breathless interest.

"As you are directly concerned," continued the Inspector, with a noticeably unpleasant emphasis on the wrong words, "I may as well tell you we have conclusive evidence that Sir Royston Gillespie was in Sudley Abbott the night his father—er—met his ill-timed end."

As he spoke he reshuffled a tape-tied bundle of papers on the desk.

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"We have also found, from inquiries directed in certain quarters, that Sir Royston was at Greystones between the hours of ten and midnight!"

"Phee-ew!"

The detective's surprise was not wholly assumed. If Collins had taken the trouble, he would have perceived a sudden flash in those moist eyes. Slade licked his lips, thinking desperately of how to inveigle the Inspector into divulging some more. It would be fatal to overdo it, but . . .

"Good Lord, Inspector, that's slick working!" He knew Collins' type: stolid, slow, thoroughgoing, but sure of his facts. "That's quick work, Inspector. But"—it was a long shot—"unless I'm mistaken you've got something else to tell."

He broke off, waiting as though for Collins to add some comment. But a frown darkened the Inspector's face.

"Something else!" repeated Collins, groping for a meaning which he could not find. "I don't quite get you there, Mr Slade."

Slade, like the Apostle, could be all things to all men. He could even, when occasions arose, as the present, stoop to flattery.

"Come, come, Inspector—don't pretend not to be clever. There are few men I know who have your—— But let that pass. I'll only say I know what you can do. You have found out something, and from that you have deduced something else. I'm ready to bet you've got a new theory. Something you can work on for the time being?"

Smugness grew in the Inspector's face. He felt that his worth was being appreciated—and by a stranger. He might unbend a little. He assumed an air of shrewdness.

"Thank you, Mr Slade. I am grateful for your appreciation, I'm sure. But to the case. To be perfectly frank with you—though this new line needs to be substantiated—I have formed a new theory. A working theory, if you like. But, of course, other than between our two selves it is not known."

He looked hard at Slade, hesitating for the moment.

The latter blinked.

"And your theory, Inspector, is that Sir Giles——"

"Was murdered!"

"Exactly! And by whom?"

To Collins it seemed that in the space in which a man takes a breath the detective had changed, that every fibre in the man's lean frame was suddenly taut, aquiver. The man was compelling and magnetic. He found himself, to his own chagrin, saying words he had no intention of uttering.

"His son—Sir Royston!"

"But those letters?"

"Forged!"

With an extra effort the policeman got a grip on himself. He glowered at Slade, morose and sullen.

The detective shook his head slowly.

"No, Inspector"—and there was a soft pleasantness in his voice that made the other writhe—"it's very ingenious, but I'm greatly afraid that you are wrong."

Collins' beetling brows contracted. He realized dimly that he was being fooled. This change was too sudden; it left him unsure of himself.

"What do you mean?"—with warmth.

Slade took his time in answering.

"Sir Giles Gillespie was murdered—yes. I agree

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with you there. As a matter of fact he was strangled——”

“Strangled!” The Inspector rose half out of his chair. The loose flesh round his mouth trembled.

“Precisely,” went on Slade; “but not by his son.”

Collins sank back into his chair. His eyes were riveted on the detective’s.

“By whom, then?” he roared.

Slade answered this blaring discharge in the tone of voice which is said to turn away wrath.

“That I can’t say.”

“Then how the devil——” Collins checked himself shortly, and recommenced: “How do you know that it wasn’t the son?”

“Well, because he went to Greystones for——”

“For what?”

Slade laughed quietly.

“For another reason, shall we say?”

The Inspector had to swallow it as best he could. The challenge came quickly, though.

“That reason won’t be any good to-morrow—at the inquest!” he rumbled savagely.

The Yard man thought on this for a moment. It was a view he had not considered.

“No—you’re right,” he admitted at last. Then:

“He went there to see a—woman.”

“A—a woman!”

Collins was sitting bolt upright. Light was breaking on his fuddled brain.

“That’s what I believe—in fact, I’m almost sure of it.”

Understanding flashed in the Inspector’s eyes.

“I get you!” he cried, his dignity swept away in his excitement. “That woman—that visitor Sir

Giles was expecting! He came to meet her—arrange something? There was something between them? That's what you're getting at!"

Slade merely looked a trifle apologetic.

"No, not that one. Another."

It was too much for the harassed official.

"For God's sake, man, say who!" he almost shouted.

"Why, who should it be but Miss Dane?" queried Slade smoothly, with a ghost of a smile.

"Miss—Miss Dane! Paula Dane—Sir Giles' ward? Rot!"

The detective was left to decide whether the expletive was meant to convey contempt or aggravation. He chose to treat it as though it had never been uttered.

"All the same, Inspector, I believe that's what happened. The son went to see the ward. The father was murdered. But the son had nothing to do with it——"

"Not even with those letters, eh?" blurted out the other. He had recovered himself, and his voice was full of sarcasm.

"How do you mean?" The detective regarded Collins sharply.

"Mean! Why, it's pretty obvious, I should think, that if Sir Giles was murdered he didn't write letters announcing his suicide. They were forged—they couldn't have been anything else! And cleverly, too. Why, man, it stands to reason!"

"Nothing stands to reason," replied Slade with mock sententiousness, "until it's disproved. And then it only stands to reason that it isn't true."

Collins grunted. He abhorred anything in the nature of a conundrum.

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"Anyway, they were forged! And Royston Gillespie forged 'em! I'm going to prove it!"

"He didn't, all the same." Slade shrugged his shoulders. "And what's more, you won't prove that he did. Sir Giles wrote them himself. Why, I don't know any more than you. But I'm certain he did. One of them—the one in my pocket—I can vouch for. I've just been speaking to a man who saw him write it."

This piece of information staggered the policeman, but he kept a hand on himself. He rose to his feet and crossed to the window. Suddenly he wheeled round.

"And what's your next move?" he asked boldly.

Slade moistened his lips with his tongue. He stared long at the blank, distempered wall opposite.

"First, to find an explanation, if I can, for the cut on Sir Giles' upper lip. It was made by an old-type razor. Sir Giles shaved once a day—in the morning. Second, to learn why he was wearing his socks inside-out! And why one of his cuff-links was fastened the wrong way round. Little things—admitted. But very interesting."

"Hum!" Collins reverted to his first opinion of the man and his finicking ways. "What about those cigarettes? What did you make of them?"

"Oh—yes." Slade's interest in the wall ceased. He turned round. "Which do you mean—the ones in the grate or those in the bureau?"

"Both."

"Well, the first were just ordinary 'gaspers.' They didn't need looking at twice; and they had been smoked against the teeth, not in a holder. But the others—the ones in the bureau"—he spoke slowly, as though choosing each word with care—

"they belonged to somebody who should prove of first importance in the case. Of course, they were doped!"

"Yes, doped—and stiffly, too. That person won't last long."

"Blackmailers never do."

Both men were staring past each other fixedly, and their voices sounded aloof, as though each followed his own thoughts without regard of the ideas of the other.

"You think those cigarettes in the drawer belonged to the woman—the visitor?"

"I do—from the temperament displayed in that letter. Blackmail requires courage. And when a woman finds she hasn't sufficient courage of her own she buys it in little round boxes."

"And the others, the stumps in the grate, what is your explanation in that case?"

"I haven't one. They puzzle me more than the woman's. I can't understand why the fingers of Sir Giles' right hand should have been pumiced, or how a piece of cigarette paper came to be stuck to his lower lip, unless he smoked cigarettes."

"But you know different?"

"I do. He always smoked a pipe."

"What suggestion have you to make?"

"None—as yet."

"The butler?"

"Perhaps. But there were no nicotine stains on his hands. Anyway, I don't see how he could have been smoking in his master's library. On the face of it it looks as though Sir Giles must have smoked them. Maybe—it's only a suggestion—the woman, whoever she is, carried the two kinds."

"But why didn't he smoke his pipe as usual?"

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"Considerate motives. Who knows? I make the suggestion. Have you any other?"

"Hum!" Collins pondered for a minute. "Only that the murderer smoked them. But that would point to a novice. And aren't we dealing with such? Where is there the strongest motive? Eh? Now, Sir Royston smokes cigarettes—'gaspers.' We know he bought a packet on the night—from the automatic machine outside the Élite Garage on the London road! We're looking for a novice. Well, would you call young Gillespie an habitual criminal?"

Slade gathered the evidence against the dead baronet's son was piling up in the Inspector's mind. Yet somehow he felt that he was right and that Collins was wrong.

After a slight pause Slade offered a suggestion.

"It would be as well to keep an eye on the butler, Thorne. Mind, I've got nothing against the man. In fact, there's something about him I rather like. But he did tell me he was gassed on a date I know to be a full month before the Germans gave our chaps their first bellyful, and that sounds queer. Do you know anything about him?"

Collins actually smiled.

"Oh, Thorne is quite a personality, I hear, among the servants of the surrounding countryside. Gets a bit fuddled at times. Has been brought up once or twice. Drink, usually, although it is always put down to the after-effects of the chlorine he swallowed. But as for liking him, I don't think there are many who do. The impression I've had is that he's very much disliked. Too domineering for those of his own class, and too surly and uncouth for those above him. It's a marvel Sir Giles kept him so long."

This account was not consistent with the detective's impressions. He made a mental note of the discrepancy, and focused on things of more immediate concern.

Collins put the next question.

"You don't think the woman murdered him?"

"No—there's the butler's testimony against that. Besides, that letter was genuine. She wants the money. If we lie quiet we'll hear from that quarter again."

"That's quite likely. Which brings us back to those other letters—Sir Giles'."

Slade smiled to himself at that "us." It was plain that the Inspector was warming, however much he disagreed on main points. Collins believed the letters to have been forged—which paradoxically made the murder itself a simpler proposition. He, Slade, felt sure that Sir Giles himself had written and posted them, which made it a harder one. Furthermore, Collins was of the opinion that the son was both the murderer and the forger. And Collins had some evidence to support his theory, evidence which would sound ugly in a court. Besides, it was true, the Inspector could indicate a motive. It was common gossip that Sir Giles and his son had disagreed, and that the disagreement had ended eighteen months before in a separation. So far Slade had been unable to form a theory, and could think of no motive for the murder strong enough to content his mind.

He realized that the case was growing more and more obscure. The murder affected several interests. He realized also that, discrediting the Inspector's new theory, and allowing the blackmailing woman to be free of any complicity in the murder, since she

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would not profit by it, he was admitting the existence of a third party with interests beyond his ken.

A third party! No clues . . .

Yet wait! That disarrangement of the dead baronet's dress—the pumiced fingers—the cut on the upper lip—the practically emptied decanter.

There were clues enough—only none of them gave him a lead. There was the butler. He might have tampered with the body before the police arrived. If not Thorne, then who? Some one had.

Slade's jaw tightened, his eyes grew brighter. He turned to the Inspector to inquire exactly what evidence there was against Sir Royston. The Inspector surprised the Yard man by the alacrity with which he responded.

Shortly after Slade took his leave.

Leaving the police-station, he walked along Old Town Road in a thoughtful frame of mind, debating with himself on the various “individual factors”—to use Inspector Collins' expression—that presented themselves for speculation.

It was by pure chance that he wandered past the railway station, crossed the low bridge, and strolled along the London road. Here the homes were fewer and larger, set well back from the gravelled sidewalk, most of them boasting a small garage built in at one side. He kept on until the next bend was reached. At this point the road dipped, and at the foot of the hill was the recently established Élite Garage and Petrol Station, resplendent in green and red paint. The man who had built it had evidently been endowed with a liberal amount of foresight. Four cars, as Slade approached, were parked by the roadside, filling up before entering the town. Just inside the left-hand gateway was propped a motor-cycle. A

man in khaki-coloured rubber trousers was bending over it, tinkering with something.

As Slade drew level with the cyclist he started. The man was Richard Thorne, the butler at Grey-stones. There was no mistaking him. Before the man could face about and recognize him the detective had stepped into the road and passed behind one of the cars drawn up there. Once or twice in the next few seconds Thorne peered round, as though looking for some one whom he expected, but each time, not seeing the person he wanted, he bent again to his machine.

At length one of the motorists paid his bill and drove off. The garage assistant who had been attending to him walked across to the butler. Slade watched the two narrowly. He saw that, under a pretence of repairing some minor damage to the kick-starting apparatus, the two were engaged in earnest, at moments heated, conversation. Eventually, however, Thorne paid his bill and left. He seemed nervous and jumpy as he passed through the gateway. As the machine chugged away up the road toward the town, raising a shower of dust for which Slade was thankful, the perplexed detective stepped back on to the pavement and lounged up to the notice-board on the iron railings spanning the two entrances.

The detective was reading an announcement about a five pounds reward which was obtainable when the garage assistant who had attended to the butler drew near and paused to wipe his grimy hands on a lump of cotton-waste. He pulled the stained check cap from his head and hung it on one of the railings. Then he struck a match and raised it to the cigarette he had just put in his mouth.

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At that moment Slade turned round.

The cigarette remained unlighted. The man's fingers trembled, and the hesitating flame went out. Under a shock of red, unruly hair his two green eyes stared at the detective like those of a wild beast suddenly aroused from slumber. His freckled nose creased as the line of his thick, coarse mouth changed, revealing a broken row of yellow tooth-stumps. He wiped a sleeve across his oil-streaked face, and gasped.

On Slade's part recovery was an instant sooner. Yet he could not keep the amazement out of his voice.

"Good Lord—the Ferret! Here!"

The red-haired man's surprise was expressed more strongly, though not more genuinely.

"Gaw' strufe! Yus!—it is! It's Mister Slade 'is blinkin' self! Blimey! Ter fink—nah! 'Im—'ere! Ruddy wars!"

CHAPTER IV: *Slade is Puzzled*

FROM the moment when he left the Élite Garage after his startling encounter with the Ferret Slade acted quickly. There was little time to lose if use was to be made of the meeting.

In a dingy-fronted theatrical costumier's situated in a squalid side-street running behind the Palace of Varieties he made a few purchases. Then he returned to the hotel and spent some twenty minutes before the small mirror of his dressing-table. When he stood back to survey his features, his facial transformation complete, he looked ten years older, grubby, blear-eyed, and thoroughly dissatisfied with life and all it held for him. Discoloured brown brogues, an old pair of flannel trousers, a seamy dust-coat with a button missing, and a shapeless, faded brown hat pulled low over his eyes heightened the effect. The tightly drawn scarf was reminiscent of long waits outside the local labour-exchange.

Fortunately the hall of the hotel was deserted. The detective got into the street unperceived by any of the staff, and at once made his way back toward the station, crossed once more over the bridge, and, with hands dug deep down in the pockets of his coat, he slowly ambled down the hill toward the garage. The Ferret, he had learned, was employed there as a mechanic and fitter.

The career of Albert Charles Worthy had been the very opposite of any which his name might have

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suggested. An old lag at nineteen, his life for the next score of years had been spent for the greater part in working off 'spells.' Better known as "the Ferret," on account of his perverted genius in seeking out information profitable for his shady pursuits, and possibly on account of his tenacious qualities, Worthy had constantly proved himself a thorn in the fleshy side of the police. Uneducated beyond the mere ability to read and write, his chief asset lay in his natural cunning. Six months before he had been released after completing a sentence of two years for half killing a welshing bookmaker on the Doncaster course. It had taken three constables and two plain-clothes men to bring him to heel, for which the magistrate had added another six months without the option. He had left the dock with all the self-collectedness of the old lag. But on his release he had disappeared. Plain-clothes men who had visited his usual haunts had returned with the news that he had not been seen by his old pals. The police had lost track of him.

And here Slade had come across him working as a garage assistant—seemingly honest enough. But Slade knew the Ferret of old. There was some very decided reason why he was lying low. Could it be fear?

He thought of the butler, Thorne, and his mind grew perturbed. Were the two working on something together? He took out his pipe to aid him in thinking it over.

He had to hang around for some seventy minutes before the Ferret came out with his coat on. Most of this time Slade filled in with chatting to a gang of workmen relaying part of the road.

He gave the Ferret a hundred yards' start on the

other side of the road, then followed, falling in step. He glanced at his watch. Evidently the dinner-hour was from twelve-thirty to one-thirty.

The Ferret led the way toward the station without looking round once, then suddenly turned aside at the bridge. Slade quickened his pace. Up a narrow alley by the goods yard turned the Ferret. The alley opened into a mean street of square, boxlike tenement-houses, a fried-fish shop at one corner and a dirty-looking greengrocer's establishment at the other. One end of the street terminated in the brick wall of the station goods yard, chalked over no doubt by the swarm of unwashed children who ran about yelling themselves hoarse. Slade sucked harder at his pipe as the smell of the frying fish and rancid fat filled his nostrils. He stepped into the gutter to avoid colliding with a woman carrying a cracked jug of beer. The Ferret rounded the corner by the greengrocer's and crossed the road. The detective slackened his pace and found his destination facing him. Opposite, on the corner of a similar street, was a public-house—the Jack o' Lantern.

The Ferret pushed open the door of the saloon bar and entered. Slade stopped to purchase a twopenny packet of "Weights" and a copy of the *Sporting Specialist* at the "Railwayman's Coffee and Tea Bar," a few yards lower down the street. Before entering the public-house he took care to refold the newspaper, to give it the appearance of having been well studied. Then from his pocket he took a cheap and showy tie-pin, and stuck it in the knot of his blue scarf. For a moment he poked his head inside the swing-door of the public bar—he preferred, always, making certain of his ground. Four men were standing in the middle of the sawdust-strewn floor, glasses in their

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hands. Behind the bar a red-faced, red-elbowed, buxom woman in black satin, vigorously polishing a glass, greeted Slade's inquisitiveness with an icy stare.

Boldly the detective entered the saloon bar next door, scuffling his feet and muttering. The Ferret looked up for a moment, rolled his tongue round his mouth, and then again leaned over the deal table to his companion. Slade eyed that companion sharply as he stepped up to the narrow bar and wheezed his request for a pint of "'alf an' 'alf" and a couple of sausage-rolls—with mustard.

Taking up his plate and glass, he sat down beside the Ferret, a couple of yards away, and took out his crumpled newspaper, an old, much-bethumbed pocket-book, and a stump of pencil. Then he swallowed a draught of beer, crunched a mouthful of sausage-roll noisily, and leaned back, spreading out his feet before him.

Besides the three men seated at the table, there were two others. They drank their beer in silence, sitting with their backs to the stained wooden partition.

As he leaned over his paper and coughed Slade's ears were acock to catch what the Ferret was saying. Worthy was evidently giving his companion plenty of food for reflection.

When Slade raised his glass to his mouth for the second time it was the Ferret who was speaking again. He spoke louder than his companion, whose voice rose scarce above a whisper.

"I'm not so easy," he was saying; "I'm not so easily satisfied. Wot's that there Slade pokin' abaht fer, eh? Nah, I'm not so easy ter satisfy. I ain't skeard. Nah! But I ain't easy—not wiv 'im abaht! Yer see—I knows 'im!"

Slade's knife bit through the stale crust with a dull, rasping sound, scraping against the plate. The stranger was waving a hand impatiently. The detective could not catch the words, but from the gesture he concluded they were an admonition to the Ferret not to rate himself too highly.

However, the Ferret was proving a trifle difficult to mollify. His voice rose harsh and strident.

"Nah, it's too risky. Slade an' the Yard crowd 'd be up ter somethin' before we knoo where we was. If they've got wind—we'd better be passin' it on ter the others, an' 'ug close ourselves. Yus, an' that butler bloke, wot abaht 'im—wiv the nobs up there an' all? Wot if 'e gets the bloomin' funk an' spills us? I never did agree to lettin' 'im in."

Whatever was hidden in the words, they certainly had the effect of causing the other to consider them for a few minutes in silence. The Ferret sipped his beer, and wiped his mouth in his hand.

Slade finished his sausage-rolls and lit up one of his cheap cigarettes. He edged his way a little closer along the seat, blowing a thick cloud of grey smoke on to his paper.

The Ferret's companion looked up at him, then shifted his gaze to his glass. Straining, Slade caught his next words. The voice was low, but clear and decisive, cold and calculating. Slade recognized the type of man—cold-blooded, purposeful.

"Now, look here. We can't leave those fellows in the lurch—and what's more, we can't leave ourselves. We've got to get rid of the stuff—somehow. They've got to receive it—somehow. That's the position. You see? Somehow! But's got to be done. As for the police—well, you needn't worry

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about them. They know nothing, absolutely nothing. Listen! After Sam brought the news that the cops were at Greystones I went along myself. I saw that Yard 'tec you speak of drive off with young Gillespie. I took the chance to buttonhole Thorne. He seemed fair out of his wits—seems he found the body. But he won't split. I put the fear o' God into him all right. He'll think twice before trying to put it on us."

At this interesting point the man leaned closer across the table and Slade lost the rest. His sharp ears caught odd fragments such as "inquest," "suicide," "London papers," which, however, enabled him to get the drift of the man's narrative.

The Ferret seemed sullen.

"You don't know that Slade feller," he muttered at length. "'E's 'ell when 'e's out to get a bloke. An' 'e's seen me. 'E won't be fergettin' in a 'urry."

His companion smote the table with his fist, and said something which roused the man.

"Gawd! Ain't I tellin' yer, Mick, as I ain't a-skeard? But if 'e comes 'is damned 'anky-panky, I'll——"

He didn't put it in words, but his clenched fist left nothing to the imagination. Mick, whoever he was, smiled, and rose to his feet.

While he was at the bar the Ferret shifted his position and saw Slade scribbling in his old notebook. His eye fell on the green sporting paper. He glanced at Slade shrewdly.

"Wot 'o, mate, wot's a likely fer—— 'Ullo"—he craned his head forward—"makin' up a blinkin' book, heh?"

He edged nearer. Slade turned round slowly, his tongue between his teeth.

"Wossat? Who's wot?" he grunted, as intelligently as pleasantly, his right hand fastening round his glass.

"Nothin', mate. Only arst if yer was makin' up a book. Business, that's why."

"An' what if I am?" demanded the husky-voiced Slade suspiciously, blowing a cloud of stale smoke into the air.

"Well, if it ain't too late"—he picked up the paper—"smornin's price . . ."

Slade picked up the three half-crowns and two shillings and sixpence, tore out a leaf from his book, and passed it and the pencil-stump to the other.

"Flush, ain't yer? Wot's yer system—weight an' time?"

The Ferret scrawled a couple of names on the piece of paper and handed it back to Slade.

"Ain't got none," he answered cheerfully, with a smirk. "Luck—that's me, matey! Wot's yer stand?"

"Corner o' Simpson's Place," said Slade thickly, who had noted the name of the street with the fish-shop on the corner. "Outside Sorkey's. Twelve—'alf-past. Saturdays—one."

"Firm?"

"Jim Ball. Newmarket—Epsom."

"Ain't any relation o' Tricksy Ball 'oo used ter work the Doncaster——"

Slade bridled.

"Nah, look 'ere, mister," he snarled; "I don't know 'oo you are, but I'm a gen'l'man—an' wot's more, works wiv gen'l'men. If yer fer classin' me wiv that flat-faced swindler as was warned six months a-back, 'ere's yer two dollars, an'——"

"Easy on, mate. I didn't mean nothin'. Just a

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joke. I got eighteen months fer man'andlin' Tricksy, so naturally I'm interested——"

He was interrupted by Slade, who, having once begun, apparently had a keen eye for business.

"Wot about yer pal 'ere? There's the paper, if 'e likes." He jerked a thumb at Mick, who had returned scowling with two glasses of beer.

"Haw! Haw! Wot—Mick?" The Ferret cackled hoarsely, as though at an excellent piece of wit. "'E ain't got no time fer 'orses, matey. 'E's too busy shinin' the shekels——"

"Shut yer blasted mouth!" grated Mick, and with a shrug of the shoulders the Ferret complied.

Slade stared, and offered the Ferret a cigarette.

"Late hours?" he asked casually, by way of something to say.

"Not so rusty. Plenty o' work. All hours. Eight ter 'alf-past six this week. Fitter, mate."

Slade accepted the offer of a match, and sat back, going through his book with assiduous care, pausing every now and then to jot something down.

Presently the Ferret got up, and with a short nod to the bogus bookmaker passed out. Ten minutes later Slade followed. Mick was left chatting amicably with the barmaid. The detective had touched his man on a weak spot. He knew the Ferret could never, if he had the money, resist a 'flutter.'

Three-quarters of an hour later he was seated attacking a long-awaited lunch in the hotel buffet. After which he gathered together one or two things from his room, gave his face an additional wash, to make sure the last stains had been removed, and set out for a tramp to Greystones. That was the next item on his programme—the baronet.

Slade found a good deal to occupy his mind as he

moved briskly along the road out of the town, but when he passed up the crescent-shaped drive he had come to a conclusion. His task was one which he found to be far from pleasant. Sir Royston would have to take him into his confidence.

The blue-uniformed figure of a policeman turned the angle of the drive as Slade paused at the hall door. Collins evidently was not leaving anything to chance. He was keeping a sharp eye on his man.

The sight of the constable reminded Slade how quickly the time was passing. When a surprised Thorne opened the door it was to admit a detective with troubled, brooding eyes.

Slade was shown at once into the dining-room. He was informed that Sir Royston had resolved not to use the library until the police inquiry had been completed, and in the meantime was spending his time in the dining-room, reading and sorting over his father's papers and correspondence.

Inside the dining-room Slade halted abruptly. From an easy-chair drawn to one side of the fireplace rose the graceful form of a woman, young, fair, appealing in a way; but there was an air of suppressed tragedy about her which fitted ill with her natural charm and youth.

Slade bowed, and before the eager baronet could speak:

"Miss Dane, I presume?" he smiled. "A great pleasure, Miss Dane, I assure you," he added gallantly.

Paula Dane smiled a little wanly, her deep blue eyes at once sorrowful and grateful. Slade took her hand, with true instinct refraining from allusion to her sorrow. He addressed himself to Sir Royston.

"I've come expressly to see you, Sir Royston."

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He hesitated, and the woman's large eyes scanned his face, searching it. "It is rather important."

He thought the baronet stiffened, but wasn't sure.

The woman spoke.

"Mr Slade, Roy—Sir Royston—tells me you are representing Scotland Yard in this inquiry?"

Slade bowed gravely.

"Yes, madam."

"Then tell me, please, has——"

"No, no, Paula!" The baronet interrupted her. "You must not ask Mr Slade questions—at least, not now." He looked at Slade, and continued: "He's here to ask us."

Roy Gillespie had caught the woman's arm. There was entreaty in his voice.

Reluctantly she checked herself.

Slade turned his eyes away, now more sure than ever of one thing.

"I know—I know!" The woman's tones were choked. Little wisps of light, silky hair lay across her white forehead. They must have irritated her. She brushed them aside with a short, brusque motion of her hand, and her bosom heaved tumultuously. There was no quiet in her over-bright eyes.

"I know," she repeated. "But . . . it doesn't seem fair!"

"Hush, darling! There is nothing to——"

"There is!" she broke out, dry-eyed, her voice sobbing. "And it's all my fault!"

Roy Gillespie placed an arm round her and gently drew her into the easy-chair. For a moment he bent over her, regarding her with eyes full of tenderness.

Then he stood up and faced Slade, his face tense and pale, but his voice even.

"Well, Mr Slade, you have something—important?"

Although she was sitting down, the detective felt the woman's burning gaze upon him, searching his face for some tell-tale sign of his mission. Slade all at once found his work harder by far than he had anticipated. And he had not counted it light.

The baronet saw him hesitate, look across to the woman and back again. He cleared his voice.

"There is something I should like to say first, Mr Slade, if you do not mind. Perhaps—perhaps it is not irrelevant. Miss Dane has promised to be my wife. You may say before her what you would say before me."

Slade considered. The moment had arrived which he had been dreading. The woman was still eyeing him. He got a hasty grip on himself.

"When did you ask her, Sir Royston?"

The baronet's face seemed to grow haggard; the woman's eyes blazed brighter than ever. Both were silent.

Then:

"Does that affect the case—materially?" The voice was toneless, the silence after the words unnerving.

Slade was seized with a sudden doubt, but he strangled it.

"Yes—for both of you!"

Roy Gillespie's eyes bespoke a thanks more eloquent than words could have expressed for that inclusion of the woman. It roused him.

"It was on the night—the night when——"

"I know. But when—what time at night?"

The young man braced his shoulders. It was the

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movement the detective had seen him make on the previous day.

"Somewhere—about—half-past eleven——"

The woman sighed heavily, wearily, and her head slipped back.

Slade motioned the baronet to a chair, and drew one closer for himself.

"Now, listen, Sir Royston," he began; "I'm going to put things clearly. Collins and his men have been sharp. There's evidence against you. And—up to a point—it's damaging. Tell me, why this sudden change since yesterday?"

He regarded the other sharply.

The baronet twined his fingers about his knees, and looked Slade straight in the eyes.

"Paula told me last night that she had lost her handkerchief. She had it with her when she met me—in the grounds, opposite the library. She is sure she remembers taking it. I've searched, and—well, the long and the short of it is, it's nowhere here. Some one has found it. There are only the police and——"

He stopped, his eyes still on the detective's face. In her chair the woman stirred restlessly.

Slade put a hand in his pocket and drew out a small lace handkerchief—a woman's. At sight of it Paula Dane gave a slight cry of fear.

"... Yes, you!" The baronet finished on a note that was almost a whisper.

The detective replaced the handkerchief in his pocket.

"Now tell me everything," he said simply, and sat back.

Roy Gillespie's eyes stared into space. "I'll tell you from the beginning, Mr Slade. Perhaps

you have heard, my father and I somehow did not hit things off together. He was a good father—don't misunderstand me—but for some reason there always seemed to be antagonism between us, something estranging us. I can't explain it. But it was there right from my childhood. We were both strong-willed, and that didn't help matters. The trouble may have begun in the fact that my mother died when I was born. I can't say. Anyhow, in such conditions matters were bound to come to a head at last. I had come back from France, and was looking round to settle down for myself. First I tried one thing, then another, but gave 'em all up in turn. Meantime things hadn't got any better. What few sympathies we had in common were soon forgotten. The climax came when I entered politics. I'm a Socialist. To my father, a business man and an employer, it was the last straw. To me, it was the one chance I had been searching for. The chance to get out of it all and express myself. Step by step I made my way. It became a point of honour with me to win. In my first two elections I was defeated, and I worked day and night to win my third. I got in. The day after I made my maiden speech in the House I received a scathing letter of congratulation from my father. That was two months ago. I did not answer it."

He paused to clear his throat.

"I'd got clear at last, and left my father and my home and my past life behind—but not altogether. When I was three years old Leatrice Gillespie, the widow of my father's brother Lionel, came to Greystones. Years later I learnt that my uncle died in Italy. He'd been an inveterate gambler, and had

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died a pauper. My father took charge of the widow and her baby daughter, Paula. Then Paula's mother died. She'd been a friend of my father's in their young days, and her death brought yet another disappointment into his life. Naturally my father made himself the guardian of his niece, but for Paula's own sake she's been brought up with her mother's maiden name. Lionel Gillespie wasn't the kind of father one would be proud of. He was the bad lot of the family.

"Well, it was when I was invalided home from France that Paula first began to count for so much in my life. She was different—and she made me different. But I didn't understand this at the time. She was at college, and I had tasted of life. I was eager for more, told her my plans, and she sympathized.

"It wasn't till the final break came that I realized all she meant to me. I strove, without her knowing it, for her. And striving for her, I managed to make good, found myself. We'd always been good pals, and when I left we kept up a continual correspondence. But the time came when the letters I'd looked forward to with impatience became a mockery. One morning I tore her letter up without having read it. I rushed out of the house and sent a telegram. The same night I motored down from London, drove straight through Sudley Abbott, and pulled up outside, by Jallopp's Farm. From there I walked—on air. I didn't get to Greystones until well after eleven. Several minutes later Paula joined me under the chestnut-tree opposite the library. That's my story, Mr Slade."

Slade liked that last simple avowal. It sounded genuine, somehow.

"And you, Miss Dane?" he inquired gently, yet firmly, his eyes still on the fire.

Something like a laden sigh escaped the woman. For a moment her bright eyes were dulled. The wax-like lids with their long, dark, drooping lashes quivered.

"There's little for me to add, Mr Slade. I got that telegram, and when the time came made my way out on to the lawn by slipping through the servants' corridor and across the servants' hall. I remember being anxious at the time not to disturb Sir Giles. When I reached the tree Roy was already there, waiting, although I'd thought I was early. Afterward I went back the same way. In the morning my maid woke me and told me the awful news. And some time later—I don't know when—I remembered the handkerchief I'd had with me. I searched for it, but couldn't find it. The police were below inquiring. They wanted to see me. I couldn't. I felt suddenly ill, and terrible things came to my mind. No one, I told myself, would believe me—believe us. That handkerchief . . . explanations. Everything that had been so right had suddenly changed to so wrong. You see . . . and you—a policeman——"

Her agitated fingers plucked at her breast.

Slade's crisp, businesslike tones cut the silence like a knife.

"Where's the telegram?"

For one solitary instant hope lived in the woman's eyes, then died. Recollection struck her with stunning force.

"I—I burnt it!" she gasped, horror-struck. "I was afraid—it might be seen! Oh! Oh, Roy!"

Roy Gillespie smiled bravely, but Slade's lips

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pressed firmer. Could he trust them—and himself? That was the thought that plagued him. He remembered Collins' look when he left him.

"What about those letters your father wrote, Sir Royston? Don't they suggest what really happened?"

The baronet shook his head slowly.

"Collins has been here again—this morning, before lunch. He said the letters were forged, and that my father was murdered. He's got some clues which he's following!"

Slade knew all about those "clues." They gave him an understanding of the woman's panic. She and her lover had included the handkerchief among them. Both of them knew that in that little white square was a motive for the murder—herself!

Slade thought hard. He had to make a decision, and rapidly, too. He made it.

"Listen!" he said, and a new note rang in his voice. "I'm going to do something I've never done before. I'm going to tell some one suspected by the police—what the evidence against him is!"

There was a moment of strained silence. Then Slade briefly outlined the gist of his interview with Collins. Gillespie confirmed what the Inspector had said, and added that he had first smoked cigarettes at all in France—the popular "Gold Flakes." He had smoked them ever since. Apart from this, his hearers heard him through in silence, and afterward Slade followed up his short narrative with asking the baronet and his *fiancée* for a more detailed sketch of the home-life at Greystones and the personality of its late owner. They set themselves to satisfy him, thankful of the opportunity he afforded them. Both were plainly moved by this evidence of the detective's

trust. But all the while he was listening Slade was turning over in his mind the scraps of conversation between the Ferret and his companion Mick which he had picked up.

From what he had heard of their reference to Thorne, the butler was exonerated of any complicity. "Seems he found the body" had been the phrase the unknown Mick had employed. But if Thorne was exempted from any connexion with the murder, he was nevertheless in league with the Ferret and Mick. Was he a dupe? The Ferret had not referred to him enthusiastically. Were the Ferret and his accomplice concerned in the murder? If the son, the unknown woman, and the butler were cleared, who but those other two were left? Slade was beginning to narrow the circle of suspects very appreciably. And if those, what could have been their motive?

That was where he stuck every time—motive.

Blackmail? No, he knew the Ferret; it was too slow a game for him. Then, though Albert Charles Worthy might badly maltreat a man when aroused, he was far too expert at slugging to go the length of killing a man.

That was a point. And from it Slade's mind turned to other matters.

At last, after Thorne had noiselessly retired with an unloaded tray and Paula Dane had poured out three cups of tea, Slade helped himself to sugar and made a new request.

"Might I use your telephone for a few minutes, Sir Royston? After that I'd like just to see the body once more. There's something I want to make sure of."

Roy Gillespie was only too willing to oblige. It was as though he and the detective had formed some

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mutual bond. Paula still seemed very much dazed, like one comprehending little that passed, but she gave Slade a grateful smile as she handed him back his cup filled for the second time.

The telephone was in the small lounge opening into the hall. As Slade was about to go out the baronet took him on one side and asked:

"May I be so bold as to ask, Mr Slade, if there is any—anyone whom you suspect? Any clue?"

Seeing the detective's under lip drawn in, he flushed hotly.

"I'm sorry," he said hastily. "I see—I shouldn't have asked that. I thank you sincerely, Mr Slade——"

Slade cut short his thanks with a shake of the head.

"Not at all, Sir Royston!" he exclaimed. "I may as well be frank. No, I haven't anyone in particular in mind. And clues—well, I can't say."

Slade was at the 'phone for nearly half an hour. His first call was Collins at the police-station. However, Collins was not there, but Slade got through to him at his home address, and, further, got what he wanted. He wanted to know what the Inspector intended to say at the inquest the next day, and by putting his queries tactfully learnt that Collins was going to bide his time. The Inspector was not to be rushed. His evidence on the next day would not include everything that had transpired meantime. He preferred to wait until his hand was complete.

Slade's second call was at long distance, and several minutes elapsed before he was linked up.

He inquired of a faint, far-away voice if it was Handley speaking, to be informed that it was, and that Mr Handley would be pleased to know who was at the other end.

Slade laughed softly and carefully spelt out his name—*s* for 'simple,' *l* for 'laggard,' and so on. There was a burring noise in his ear-piece when he concluded. That formula was one of his little jokes—well known at the Yard. Then Slade made known what he wanted. He wanted Mr Handley, like a good fellow, to look up everything he could about a certain Lionel Gillespie, who died in Italy about twenty years before. He, Slade, believed that this Gillespie was in the files. If anything startling came out of it, to post to him straightaway. The Chief would give Handley directions. The voice at the other end of the 'phone gave a crackling assurance, and suddenly faded to nothing. Slade hung up the receiver and made his way upstairs, buttoning up his jacket as he went.

Stepping inside the unlocked room where the body still reposed, the detective switched on the soft-shaded lights and crossed to the bedside. He raised the white covering from the head and peered close. The pallid, rigid features were a trifle more sunken than on the day before, the forehead drier, less glossy. But it was not such differences that Slade had come to look for. He was looking for something else.

He was not disappointed.

Shading the dull white of the jowl and cheeks was a fresh-grown beard of short, stubbly bristles. Despite the fact that the heart had ceased to beat for some thirty odd hours, the beard had still continued to grow.

Slade had deduced something which appeared significant enough. That cut on the upper lip had been made after Sir Giles had been strangled, and before his body had been dragged on to the terrace and transfixed on the steel 'knife.' Some

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one, in other words, had carefully shaved the dead man's face.

Why?

Sir Giles had been a clean-shaven man.

Slade regarded the new-grown beard closely. There seemed nothing out of the usual, and yet . . .

There must be a reason!

He remembered the disarranged clothes . . . the fingers. Again he raised the limp right arm and scanned the fingers. Yes, the soft flesh of the first two of that hand had undoubtedly been rubbed with pumice or something similar. The flesh between the fingers was still stained a pale yellow.

Had Sir Giles pumiced them himself? Even so, he had not, surely, been so negligent over his dress. And the cut on the lip? No, Slade could have sworn, when he had first seen it, that the cut was several hours under the twenty-four old. And Sir Giles shaved only in the morning!

For several minutes he stared down at the corpse, thinking deeply. Then, more puzzled than ever, he slowly replaced the linen sheet over the still features.

He stood back from the bed, and as he did so he stiffened. Something had tapped, brushed at the window! Without turning round, glancing out of the corner of his eye, he peered across the room in that direction. The reflection of the light on the glass made it impossible for him to see anything outside.

Cautiously, hands in the pockets of his jacket, apparently sunk in thought, he walked slowly across the room. At the far end he paused, faced about, standing with his face toward the bed.

He waited perhaps thirty seconds.

Then he saw it. A white, shadowed face above the sill, pressed flat against the glass.

Without taking his eyes off the wall opposite he once more paced slowly across the room. The face disappeared for a moment as he crossed opposite to the window, but by instantly changing his direction some fifteen degrees he caught a glimpse of it as he stepped up to the wall. The door was a few feet to his left.

Again he paused. He turned round. One of the hands in his pockets was drawn half out.

Crack!

At the same instant as his finger pressed on the trigger his other hand jabbed at the light-switch.

There was the sound of falling glass and a sudden sharp cry of pain. A reek of burnt cordite—and in a flash Slade was at the window, shielded by the darkness within the room. He jerked, the window swung out, and a rush of cool air met his face. From below came the sound of some one running lightly over soft soil.

Slade raised his gun again . . . his hand dropped.

The sound of running ceased. Slade switched on the light and returned to the window. It was plain how the intruder had got there. A gnarled and sinuous ivy-vine, leafless and tough-stemmed, with thick, black tendrils affording good foothold, clung to that side of the house, skirting the window.

The detective spent barely a second regarding the vine. His eyes had caught sight of something that caused him to catch his breath.

Upon the sill, with a few jagged splinters of broken glass, were two splashes of wet, fresh blood.

Slade had fired high. The fractured glass had done the rest.

CHAPTER V: *Into the Small Hours*

THE baronet met him half-way up the stairs. The two men made for the garage. There was no time for lengthy explanation. In the hall they passed a wide-mouthed, amazed Thorne, who gaped at them.

Sir Royston got out his car and started up the engine, while the sharp-eyed Yard man took a rapid glance at the motor-cycle propped in the corner. Its mud-guards and wheels were splashed with barely dried mud.

Then he clambered in beside the baronet.

At the end of the drive they pulled up to avoid running down a winded constable who was panting toward them.

He saw Slade.

"I tried to head—him—off!" he gasped. "But he—had—a—car!" He pulled off his helmet and mopped his streaming face. "Grey one—saw by—rear light! TS one seven two five!"

"Which way did he turn?" called Slade.

"Down!" panted the constable, struggling again into his helmet.

Slade didn't know which way was "down," but the baronet did. The car gave a lurch which threw Slade against the back of his seat and startled the constable into the drive-side shadows.

Once on the highroad, the baronet pressed his foot hard down. The rush of cold air acted like a

tonic. Slade's keen eyes stabbed the darkness, peering ahead for a tiny red glimmer. But their quarry had made the most of his start. At the cross-roads below Jallop's Farm they pulled up, undecided. Luck, however, and a light breeze were with them. Away to the right, above the low soughing of the trees, came the steady but faint purring of a racing car.

Gillespie brought his car round sharply, and held her to it. Slade, expert driver as he was, let the baronet keep the wheel, as he had the great advantage of being familiar with the lie of the country.

Neither spoke a word. Out of a shaggy drift of cloud sailed a speck of moon. Then once more the clouds closed in again. Slade became aware that they were rising. The baronet changed gears adroitly, and the car droned her way up the sharp incline. When they reached the crest Slade rested a restraining hand on Gillespie's arm. The car slurred to a standstill.

The detective rose in his seat. Suddenly he pointed. Moving at a rapid pace, and bearing to the left, passed a faint splash of light. Roy Gillespie said something under his breath which the detective did not catch and sat down, his hand on the wheel.

"He's bearing round for the town—below the station rise," he said shortly.

Slade kept silent, watching that fading speck of light. Soon it would be gone.

"Isn't there a short cut?" he asked.

The baronet shook his head.

"No—only the one road. It turns into the main London road at the foot of a small hill, although there's a bit of a branch road about a hundred yards up from the main road. It leads out on the common.

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This is the way I came that night. At the foot of the hill on the main road is the garage where I bought those cigarettes and——”

“Ah!” Slade had suddenly remembered—the Élite Garage.

More from force of habit than from anything else, he took a final look round before he sat down.

“Hullo!” he exclaimed. “Where’s that light coming from?”

Gillespie twisted his head round, his hand still on the wheel.

“Where?”

“Look!” Slade pointed behind them, away from the road.

As the baronet caught sight of the light it disappeared.

“That’s queer,” remarked Slade thoughtfully. “I don’t remember us passing any light back there.”

“Look—there it is again!”

Both men stared.

“That’s in the direction of Jallop’s Farm, isn’t it?” put in Slade.

Once more the light went out.

The baronet turned his head.

“Yes. There’s no other place round here except Greystones, and that lies over there—in the dip. And yet it can’t come from Jallop’s Farm! The place has been untenanted for years. Old Brent who had it last hung himself in the kitchen—’way back during the War some time. And nobody’s fancied the place since. I don’t altogether blame ’em.”

Again the light showed, burned brightly for a couple of seconds, then vanished, leaving the darkness blacker than before.

Slade got down again in his seat.

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"Go on," he said in a low voice, "and don't hurry. Take it easy. I'm going to smoke."

The baronet gave him a sharp glance, but did not speak. Slade was fumbling with his pouch.

The car staggered forward.

"Tell me when we reach that branch road," said Slade shortly, pausing between his first puffs.

"Right-o!"

The baronet lit a cigarette. Neither spoke again for some minutes. Then Gillespie asked:

"You want me to stand by with the car?"

The Yard man nodded.

"Yes. D'you mind?"

The baronet looked at the ominous sky and shrugged his shoulders.

"No—only too darned glad to help."

He flicked the ash from the glowing end of his cigarette. A few minutes later:

"Well, here's the branch road, Mr Slade. It's little more than a cutting. I suppose it'd be as well to turn her round here—eh?"

"Yes—yes. Good idea." Slade seemed to rouse himself from his thoughts by an effort. Glancing round in the darkness, he made out a rough, narrow path running back from the road to the right. Thrown against the hedgeside were the rotting remains of an old wooden gate.

The baronet brought the car about and backed her several yards up the boulder-strewn path. Then he let the engine run down and switched off the strong headlights.

Slade got out and knocked the warm ashes from his pipe.

Suddenly he looked up.

"How much petrol have you got?" he inquired.

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"About four gallons—all told."

The detective was feeling in an inner pocket.

"I'm going up the road there. If I'm not greatly mistaken I'll be back before very long. And I'm counting on needing a lift!"

Roy Gillespie nodded. He saw it was the wrong time to appear over-curious, and kept his peace.

"You mean you'll be coming back this way"—after a pause—"on purpose!"

"I think so." Slade was occupied in drawing on a pair of black rubber overshoes. For all the baronet had seen to the contrary he had found them by the roadside.

"Then I'd better not smoke."

One more hard tug and the shoes were on. The detective stood up and stamped his feet.

"It'd be as well not to," he said approvingly. "But be ready to start up any minute—in case, anyway."

Gillespie got out of his seat, raked out a plaid travelling-rug from under one of the back seats, and spread it over the bonnet and radiator.

"I'll see she's tucked up," he grinned.

"Well, so long, Sir Royston. It may be a long wait. But if I'm not back in a couple of hours call it off!"

"Don't worry, Mr Slade. I won't be expecting you a minute before I see you. All the best!"

The darkness swallowed Slade. Roy Gillespie clambered back into the car, and settled himself to await the detective's return—should he return.

It was not long before Slade found himself on the London road. One or two cars trundled along in the direction of the station, but otherwise the road was deserted. It was too far out of the town for passenger traffic.

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Just before the now familiar bend in the road beside the garage the detective crossed to the other side.

A couple of cars were parked on the little drive of the garage. Two assistants were busy pumping.

For an instant Slade experienced a cold doubt—then disappointment.

Neither of the two assistants had red hair. And the cars . . . one was of a nondescript blue-green colour—the precise colour was hard to discern in the electric light—and the other was a deep maroon.

Yet what else could he have expected? Slade, besides being not easily perturbed, had the complementary quality of being not easily satisfied. He had said two hours. Very well, he would wait.

The minutes dragged by interminably. Quite an interval elapsed after the two cars drove off before another customer arrived—a Boy Scout carrying his pedal-cycle on his shoulder. In one hand he carried a twisted mud-guard. His cycle, as he stepped into the blaze of light, appeared in sore straits. The front wheel was buckled beyond all hope of straightening, and the chain had snapped in two.

Slade had to smile at the woebegone air of the youngster. The boy soon made known what he wanted. He wished to leave his battered cycle at the garage, while he went on to some meeting he had promised to attend. One of the mechanics, with an obvious joke about brussels sprouts which Slade, crouched behind the stone side-coping, did not catch, asked how it had happened. This boiled up afresh the simmering bitterness of the youngster.

“Some mad fool who ought to be put where he belongs. I was peddling up the rise the other side of the bridge. Suddenly his lights caught me. I

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didn't hear him before he was on me. And the brute kept his hands off his hooter. If I hadn't turned myself into a brick wall he'd have run me down."

"Ain't hurt yerself, have yer, son?" asked one.

"Never mind, kid, Pa'll buy you another?" said his mate, not unkindly.

The young face in the ruddy glare of the electric lights puckered up. The boy hitched his belt and swallowed hard. His eyes were dangerously moist.

"I ain't got no Pa," he blurted, and rammed his hat over his ears. "I got it"—he pointed to the broken cycle—"in a competition."

For a moment the men gathered round the boy were nonplussed.

"What're yer goin' to do, then, son?" inquired one, stooping over the battered parts.

The boy's head lifted.

"Going to do!" he repeated, his round face brightening with resolve. "Why, I'm going to make the brute pay for it!"

The men stared.

"How, kid?"

"Report him!" came the lightning-like response. "He wasn't so quick but what I got his number!"

He made to move off. One of the men slapped him on the shoulder and tried to press something into his hand. But the boy sturdily refused it.

"What was his number, kid? Don't go an' fergit it!"

"Not much!" grinned the youngster, turning round. "TS one seven two five. An' here's the best place to dot it down."

He tapped his forehead.

But Slade was not watching the boy any longer.

Out of the little red-painted office behind what

Slade judged to be the tool-shop stepped a stodgy familiar figure. The Ferret had evidently been listening behind the door to all that had been said.

"'Ere, crusty knees, yer can't go leavin' yer blasted old iron aroun' 'ere, an' yer needn't think it. Clear aht! 'Ear me?"

The amazed youngster stared at the coarse face, then hoisted his twisted cycle-frame on to his shoulder and stooped to pick up the mud-guard.

One of the men sheered off, but the other protested.

The Ferret turned on him with a savage snarl, and the man backed away.

After the boy had gone the Ferret went back into the small office and slammed the door behind him.

Slade had twenty minutes to think things over before the next customer arrived, a local delivery-man with his Ford van. He had been working late—contract work. Two minutes later a young man and a girl in a two-seater drew into the kerbside outside the garage fencing. Before the young man had paid his bill a car of different pretensions pulled up behind the two-seater. The driver got out and crossed the pavement. His face was averted.

With the air of one who knows his way about a place and is sure of himself the man strode up to the office and banged loudly on the door with his fist.

Before one of the two mechanics could approach the door opened. The Ferret came out.

"'Ullo, ol' man, I—— Why, wot the 'ell——"

He stopped, at a loss for words—a rather unusual predicament for Albert Charles Worthy, whose vocabulary was, of its kind, one of the most extensive in the kingdom.

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The newcomer growled something which the detective, for all his straining, missed. The two men stepped into the zone of light.

The palms of Slade's clenched hands grew moist, and all at once he was aware that the undimmed brilliance of the flare-signs hurt his eyes. The man with the thin mouth and the strip of sticking-plaster across his cheek was Mick.

Before the Ferret had regained his customary flow of words the detective had darted back, crossed the road and recrossed again, and taken cover behind the two-seater. The car behind was a massive, low-bodied touring-car, grey, and, judging from build, designed for speed.

Slade, playing for every minute he could steal, took a risk. He threw himself across the three yards of road between the cars. There was just time for a hurried glimpse of the number over the rear light, and then, his pulses racing, he unlatched the door of the rear compartment and sprang inside. The well-oiled lock closed without a sound.

Even in the stress of the moment that was a point not lost upon the level-headed detective.

He crouched low on the rug.

Scarcely had he managed to regulate his breathing, and hitch the pocket containing his revolver under him, in case of an emergency, before he heard the sound of hurrying steps behind the car.

Then a voice. It sounded like the Ferret's, but he couldn't be certain.

Some one laughed—a high-pitched, cracked laugh, slightly hysterical. Some one else swore—the Ferret. He recognized that guttural blasphemy.

Something clattered in the road, almost on a level with Slade's head. Then followed a sound which

puzzled him for a moment. Then he realized. They were changing the number-plate!

The sound of voices seemed to pass over the detective's head. Some one started up the engine—and cursed thickly.

A door in front opened. What might have been the old number-plate was thrown inside. Then somebody slumped down into the near seat and somebody else squeezed past him into the driving-seat.

The car gave a staggering jolt and slid smoothly out of the glare of the garage lights.

Slade rose to his knees, and remained there, swaying.

He had a sudden sense of misgiving, and a bother to save himself from toppling headlong.

The car was being turned. The driver brought the wheel over and changed gears in the same moment. The next thing that Slade knew was that they had repassed the *Elite Garage* in a flash and were speeding—away from *Sudley Abbott*!

He could see the glare of the low headlights on the road, a travelling patch of light that silhouetted the two figures seated in front. The taller—Mick—was driving.

Balancing skilfully as the car gathered speed, he levered himself to his feet with outstretched hands.

It seemed strange that neither of the men in front should speak a word.

There were two leather-upholstered seats with arm-rests in the rear compartment. Slade sank down in one and stretched his cramped limbs. His head was thrumming violently and his mouth was parched. He looked at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. An hour and twenty minutes of the two hours had

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already slipped by. He wondered what Gillespie was thinking.

Despite the danger of his position, Slade was feeling more disappointed than anything else. He was at a loss. And it came hard to have to admit it. In an awkward moment, back there on that descending road, in the baronet's car, with every chance of losing his quarry, Slade had made a characteristically rapid decision. Those lights they had seen had been signals to some one. Slade had connected a couple of loose links. The Ferret had been lying low for six months. That he wasn't running straight might be taken for granted. Jallop's Farm had been unoccupied for several years, with no likelihood of ever housing a new tenant. And further, the Ferret was working in league with others. They must have a base for operations.

He had concluded that his quarry would, after thinking he had shaken the detective off, return by the same road to the farm.

Apparently, with the car travelling at something like an even forty miles an hour in the direction of London, he had drawn a blank. By great good fortune, however, he had managed to stick to his quarry. Slade took out his revolver and fitted another cartridge into the empty chamber. If one of the men chanced to look back he might need its assurance.

The next question which perplexed him was an obvious one. What had Mick been after at Greystones?

Again he thought of the Boy Scout's story. Mick had guessed that he would be followed, and had plunged for a roundabout way of throwing off his pursuer, making first away from the town, and then

doubling back across the railway bridge. Besides, he reflected, the Ferret had evidently been waiting for him. Which meant that the Ferret had lied when he had said he finished work at the garage at half-past six.

Slade rapidly surveyed what had happened. He leaned back in the darkness, his eyes half closing, and tried to sum up, but couldn't. He saw only that every step led him farther away from his original purpose, the investigation of the death of Sir Giles Gillespie.

Things had begun to move quickly. The Ferret had recognized him, Mick had trailed him. He knew that there would be short shrift for him if he blundered. . . .

His thoughts were interrupted by the coarse tones of the Ferret. The man seemed strangely anxious.

"We ain't missed 'im, 'ave we, Mick?"

Mick grunted, and the car flew faster still.

After a moment:

"We ain't, 'ave we, Mick?"

If the Ferret wanted reassuring, he got it. Mick let himself go for about three minutes, only pausing for want of breath. Slade smiled grimly. That cut on Mick's face must have been pretty deep.

Suddenly the Ferret waved an arm excitedly.

"Jerry! There 'e is! Look!"

Slade slid quietly to his knees as the car slowed down.

The headlights had revealed a man sitting on a tar-barrel by the side of the road, placidly smoking a pipe.

The Ferret was the first to get out, before the car had run to a standstill. Slade heard his rough greeting.

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"Wot-o, Jerry! Got the telegram all right, then?"

The man must have nodded assent, for the Ferret went on:

"There's a —— busy up at that Greystones place, queering our pitch. Old friend Slade."

He finished by clearing his throat and expectorating. Slade didn't appreciate the alliterative allusion to himself—it was too colourful.

The three men by this time were grouped about the tar-barrel, and talking in harsh undertones which Slade could not make out distinctly.

His position at the moment was little short of perilous. He had no desire to be discovered with a bullet in his head when the sun rose, or even with an ugly gash in his throat.

He remembered the well-oiled door-latch.

Getting out the opposite side was the work of a few seconds. On the gritty road his rubber overshoes made no noise that could be heard three yards away.

When the three men returned to the car Slade was hanging on to the stepney wheel over a number-plate which had been changed from TS 1725 to FM 8936.

For half a mile the car retraced its route, wheeled off at a branch road, then off that in its turn. The car pulled up and one of the men got down and unfastened a white gate on which was painted the words "Private Road."

Slade passed a moment of horrid suspense, for fear lest, after the car had passed through, the man should return to secure the gate and so discover him.

But the detective's luck held. The car did not stop again until it drew up before a white-fronted house with a flight of red stone steps leading up to a front

door screened by a wide trellised verandah. Dark-painted shutters—Slade could not tell their colour—hung back on their hinges against the wall. Telephone insulators stood out white against the dark sloping roof and gutters.

Lightly Slade swung down from his perch and disappeared behind a privet-hedge.

The three men got out and rang the door-bell. Slade could hear the bell softly tinkling somewhere inside the house. Then the door opened and they passed inside.

Slade looked at his watch. It was five minutes past the two hours. Gillespie would be on his way back to Greystones.

Cautiously the detective set about a preliminary reconnoitre. No light showed at any of the windows in the front of the house. The place had the air of having been long deserted. There was a tumbledown garage at the far side, with a warped door ajar. Inside, by the narrow ray of his flash-lamp, the detective saw another car—a yellow one—with a thick layer of grey-brown dust coating the wheel-spokes. Its radiator was still warm.

On the front seat was a grey felt hat with a shabby black band. In the rear compartment, lying in a heap on the floor, was a fur motoring-wrap.

He just checked himself from whistling under his breath.

So there was a woman mixed up in this too!

He was careful to leave the garage door as he had found it, and after skirting a large clump of prickly bush worked his way round to the rear of the house. There was a large garden, stretching well back, with narrow paths that ran between the tall black shapes of the whispering trees. There was an air of sombre

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weirdness about the place which would have daunted a man less sure of himself. As it was, Slade experienced a mild attack of the 'creeps,' but with the peculiar mental poise that stamped him realized at once what caused the weirdness. Even in the darkness he could see that the place—the grounds, at any rate—had been left untended for a long time—years. A tangling mass of undergrowth and rank weeds, over-trailing the paths in some places, caused him to tread warily. There was a musty smell in the air, as of rotting vegetation. He wondered what place it was, and to whom it belonged. In its time it must have had some pretension toward rural elegance.

At the back were large casement windows framed in iron, with sills barely six inches above the ground. From one of these windows a bright light shone. The sound of voices came from within.

Whoever the talkers were, they had not thought it necessary to draw the blind.

Slade tried the door set between the two windows, but the locks and hinges were red with rust, which powdered his hands. He had to give up the idea of getting in there just then.

There was nothing for it, if he was to learn anything now that he had got there, but to get up to the window, listen—and wait. It was risky, but it was a chance.

Figures inside the room passed to and fro, throwing long shadows, and Slade had to crouch low and pick his way gingerly between the trailing brambles and thorns. Approach along the wall itself was out of the question. The undergrowth was too thick. Besides, the ground was littered with dry leaves, which rustled alarmingly when trodden upon. His rubber overshoes served him little better than ordi-

nary shoes, except that they afforded some additional protection against the sharp burrs.

By dint of long waits and a great deal of patience, the plodding Slade at length reached his objective, and flattened himself against the cold stone to one side of the window. He twisted himself into an uncomfortable position, so that he could see across one deserted corner of the room. Once his trousers became entangled, and in twisting to release them he ripped open the back of his left hand on something sharp. He did not realize he had torn the flesh until some time later, when the cold night air began to affect the wound rather painfully.

Little by little, with an extended foot, he cleared a patch wide enough to allow him to bend down and wriggle over on his side. The ground was damp, soaked with dew, which soon chilled him to the marrow. But he stuck it. By now he could see the five occupants of the room. There was the Ferret and his companion Mick. The man "Jerry," although he could not recall him, reminded Slade vaguely of some one he knew. Besides these there was another man—who appeared to have little to say—and a woman.

It was the woman who interested Slade most, despite what he knew of the others. It didn't take him long to notice that the men listened to her under a compulsion much stronger than mere respect.

Once, after a deal of animated discussion, she left them for a moment, and returned with a large paper-bound volume in her hands. A telephone directory of the district—or London?—guessed Slade, when, having run a finger down several pages, she turned to the 'phone on the sideboard and picked up the receiver.

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The rest of the company seemed a good deal easier after her message had been put through. For some minutes no one spoke. The men smoked their cigarettes vigorously, dimming the room with large blue whirls. Then Mick drew a packet of papers from his pocket, and once more they began to argue heatedly.

Slade, who could hear nothing of what was said, save a low rumble, tried to learn something by watching closely the various speakers' mouths. But he was too far away. He had to give it up and content himself with looking on.

Once the Ferret started to pour himself out a drink from the decanter on the sideboard, and when the woman tried to stop him it looked as though he was going to raise a scene. Slade, cold as he was, got interested, but the little *tableau* was spoilt by the inconsiderate Mick, who slapped a heavy hand on his irresponsible companion's shoulder and forced him down into his chair.

Slade looked at his watch and frowned. Sir Royston would have been home some two hours already.

When he looked up again it was to see the company filing out of the room. At that moment he realized how completely stranded he was. He was tired, too; off the main road, any number of miles from anywhere, without the glimmer of a chance of getting back to Sudley Abbott. In any case it would mean a long tramp—if he was to do it before daylight . . .

As he lay there thinking desperately of the strait he was in he caught the sound of gruff voices round at the front of the house. Some one was starting up the car.

Into the Small Hours

He glanced back into the room. His eye caught the telephone. It was a chance—a wild, mad chance. But he was prepared to take it. He was so chilled that he had to clench his teeth to prevent them from chattering like castanets.

In a trice he was up and tugging at the stiff lever of the window arm. At the third attempt he wrenched it far enough back. Luckily no one had thought it worth while to bolt the window from the inside. As he stepped into the room he heard the door of a car slammed to.

He crossed straight to the book he had seen the woman bring in. As he had guessed, it was a telephone directory. A local one; it was open at EA—EM, and he understood that 'phone call.

The Élite Garage again!

Yes, there was the number. But there was no time to devote to speculation. He fumbled with the leaves, got his number, made sure of it, and crossed to the 'phone.

There he paused for a half-second. On the sideboard, against the telephone, where the woman had left it, was a crumpled handkerchief. Even before he touched it he knew what the scent would be. That sweet, sickly . . .

Lilac!

He thrust it in his pocket and picked up the receiver. The seconds ticked by as he waited impatiently for a responsive crackle in the ear-piece. Then it came.

He put a question. Before the answer was completed he butted in with:

"Tell Sir Royston it's Slade, and I want him at once—immediately! Look sharp!"

More seconds ticked by as he waited. Then at

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last he heard the voice of the baronet, drowsy with slumber.

Ninety-three more seconds were all Slade required to explain everything. By which time the baronet at the other end of the wire had awakened to a complete wakefulness. He shed his tiredness with a word. His voice came through clear and ringing.

Slade, mindful of the time, cut him short, and hung up the receiver.

As he did so there was a faint click, and before he knew what had happened the room was plunged in darkness.

He spun round in time to hear the door closed softly. His hand closed round the butt of his revolver.

He waited.

Then from somewhere out of the darkness floated a light, mirthless laugh—a woman's !

CHAPTER VI: *The Velvet Mask*

WHY such a thought should come to him at that moment Slade knew neither then nor later. In the first minute of eerie silence after that laugh had ceased to ring in his ears he recalled the fact that not once had he seen the woman's face distinctly. Whenever she had been turned toward him her head had been lowered and her face shadowed. Her figure—that was firmly impressed upon his mind. But her face—no.

The dizzy sensation above his eyes left him suddenly. All at once he was cool and thinking clearly.

She was in the room. Alone? He was not sure, although he thought so. But what was she waiting for?

He was not left long in doubt. Almost simultaneous with the thought came the cool, measured command:

"You have turned round, and are facing the table—five feet away. You will throw your gun upon it when I have counted three. And you will remain seated!"

Slade swallowed hard. He realized that he was pitted against an uncommonly efficient adversary—a clear-thinking one.

He did not answer. The first count came, short and crisp.

"One!"

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The chair under the detective creaked.

"Two!"—as even-toned as before.

A slight pause. Then:

"Three!"

The detective's hand came out of his pocket. There was a clatter on the table.

Again came that low laugh—slightly amused. There was a faint click from the far corner by the door, and once more a warm light glowed under the pink lamp-shade.

"Don't stir a finger!"

The cutting tones were Slade's. The revolver in his hand was cocked menacingly, and his square jaw was set with grim purpose.

Not a muscle of the woman's finely moulded form quivered. A trembling shimmer of light flickered down the clinging folds of her perfectly draped evening gown of silver tissue. Under the black velvet mask which hid the top half of her face the carefully pencilled lips were drawn tight. The hand holding the little automatic was at her side, limp. Through the piercings of the mask eyes glared in baffled rage from the hard features of the Yard man to the table, on which lay Slade's adjustable pocket-spanner.

"Don't raise your arm—just drop it!"

The dark eyes in the mask flashed, but the little automatic clattered obediently to the floor.

Slade stepped forward, hooked it with his foot, then stooped and picked it up. He was taking no chances.

He stood back, and motioned her to a chair. She sat down and crossed her hands before her on the table. Slade had been careful to remove her handbag from her reach. She now pointed toward it.

"Would you mind my smoking?"

The question was artless, the tone non-committal, but he felt more than saw the shadowed eyes boring into his. And he knew there was malice, if not hate, in those eyes.

He opened the handbag and took out a gold cigarette-case.

"I do not smoke cigarettes myself," he explained.

Her glance, what he caught of it, was withering. She chose a cigarette with studied care, and he offered her a light—from her own matchbox.

Slade then sat down in a chair at the opposite end of the table. He seemed to be quite at his ease.

At last:

"Don't you take your mask off in company?"

She smiled.

"The company wasn't—invited."

Then her manner changed.

"You're very thorough—for a Yard man, you know"—with lavish contempt.

An inscrutable look came into Slade's eyes. He made a show of placing his revolver on the table before him. One hand pulled at an ear.

"Very thorough—one might almost say clever."

The laugh which accompanied the words was harsh and jangling. She blew a cloud of dull blue smoke across the table. Slade caught a whiff of it, and his head jerked up spasmodically.

Sickly as had been the cloying aroma of the heavy perfume, it was as the breath of a mountain breeze compared with what now hung in his nostrils.

And he knew he was not mistaken. Dope! Mixed with the tobacco of the cigarette was—opium!

For an instant his face must have betrayed his

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thoughts, for the woman's eyes suddenly glinted shrewdly, and her red lips parted in a little malicious smile, revealing two rows of small, even white teeth.

"Why don't you have one? Spoils of war, eh?"

Slade answered by stretching out a hand and picking up his pocket-spanner. The act served to goad the woman, reminding her in a subtle way of how she had been duped; but she kept her feelings under a marvellous restraint.

A silence lay on the pair until the woman finished her cigarette. Then she fell to drumming with her fingers on the table. If she was at a loss her affectation of nonchalance was superb. Slade was not at all sure that his silence was having effect.

At last, however, he was made aware that his patience was beginning to tell. Her fingers drummed louder. Suddenly she looked up. The drumming stopped.

Slade's hand on the table was describing geometric designs. When he met her gaze it moved three inches nearer the revolver, his thumb moving at a tangent to the butt.

"Well, Mr Slade, but aren't you wasting a fine opportunity?" She had dropped sarcasm. She was sounding the man.

"Not a bit." Slade spoke airily. "Investigations are proceeding."

Her finger-tips skimmed the polished surface in a light *arpeggio*.

"You mean?"

Slade's smile gave effect to his words.

"There are others besides myself, of course. You see, there's something in being thorough!"

She gave him a sharp, appraising glance.

"I haven't denied its value!"

The Velvet Mask

Slade regarded her severely for a moment.

"Would you mind explaining——" he ventured, and she quickly caught him up.

"My mask?" She patted the piece of black velvet with her long, tapering fingers, and smiled with mock goodwill. "Not in the least. I didn't want you to see me—my face. One would have thought that was obvious."

Slade chose to be dense.

"And what is to prevent me——" He left it unsaid.

She shook her head lightly.

"From what I've heard of you—you're not that kind."

Slade's eyebrows raised the merest trifle. She saw her mistake. But it was too late. Slade drove the point home.

"Then we're strangers? That's interesting."

She bit her lip. Slade saw the delicate line of her throat suddenly palpitate. She attempted a recovery.

"That is not what I meant——"

"No?"—sceptically.

"No!"—definitely. Then softly: "Like all policemen, you rather amuse me. You're all so big, so brave—but like bubbles. You all float to a conclusion—and expire."

Slade, for his own reasons, was quite ready to fence with her.

"And what's the conclusion I've floated to?" he asked mildly.

She looked him straight in the eyes and laughed easily, spreading her hands apart in an expressive gesture. Slade admired her acting. It was perfect. He felt clumsy and crude beside her.

"That we're strangers."

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Again came that trilling laugh. The sound of it seemed to increase her confidence in herself.

Slade's eyes grew shrewd. Some while had elapsed since they had sat down. His object had been to play for time, time to think—and bring Sir Royston nearer. And she was aiding him admirably. Was it because she was alone? Had all those others driven off? Was she too playing for time? If so—time for what?

He took up the point where she left it, watching her with curious eyes.

"I may be wrong. But you forget that we have mutual friends."

She flashed him a startled glance, yet her tone was purely nonchalant.

"You are sure—mutual?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Sure! What else would you call the Ferret?"

For the first time she was left without an answer. Her gaze dropped.

Slade was beginning to feel his way.

"Or"—he pulled at his ear again—"Sir Royston Gillespie?"

She looked up.

"I do not follow you there," she murmured, puzzled, her hands clasping under her chin.

Slade relaxed.

"Sorry. My mistake. I should have said—Sir Giles Gillespie."

Her face under the mask went white suddenly, and her fingers twitched nervously. In spite of her wonderful self-control, she couldn't meet his gaze.

"Sir Giles Gillespie!" She affected consideration. "Let me see," she said slowly. "Yes, I believe I did

The Velvet Mask

see him—once. If we both have the same man in mind."

"There can be no mistake," he assured her. "I know, for instance, that you saw him two nights ago."

"Indeed!"

Her tone was as soft as silk.

"Only it happened two nights ago that Sir Giles was——"

He paused to give more effect to the word. She waited with interested patience.

"—murdered!"

She half rose, then sank down again limp. Her hands were clasped tightly, the pink receding from the finger-tips. Slade would have given anything—gladly—to have had that velvet mask off just then.

"You will perceive that the outlook for you is not very promising," Slade pointed out.

One hand was pressed to her bosom, as though to quell a surging emotion.

"You talk in riddles," she protested lamely.

He went on regardless.

"Especially with blackmail more than hinted at——"

"Ah!"

He could have sworn that she winced—yet was not sure. The mask—it left a shadow. He could hardly be sure of anything with that screening her face.

"—and a flying visit, and a fur wrap that's lying on the floor of a yellow car—not fifty yards away!" He paused. "Small details. But not without their interest."

Of a sudden she was strangely calm. It was as though the fire had gone out of her, leaving behind something mechanical, incapable of feeling.

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Her glowing eyes sought his and found them.

"And cigarettes"—she seemed to bite the words with her teeth—"and a magazine, and——"

She wasn't quite sure. Slade helped her out.

"A letter, unsigned—reeking with perfume. The handwriting, without doubt a woman's."

She laughed outright.

Slade glanced up at her quickly, startled.

"So that's why you're here, is it?"

The detective's hand dropped on the revolver. She appeared not to notice the movement.

"And to think I let myself get scared about—*that!* Why, Mr Slade, you'd positively shine as the wicked uncle in a pantomime! You would, indeed."

Her manner stung Slade to irritation. There was something in the situation which was eluding him, but he contrived to retain placidity.

"This is where we ring down on pantomime." Under the still bland tones of his voice there was a note of finality that was not to be ignored. "These details may appeal to your ideas of comedy, but they are details which you'll have to explain."

He drew something light from an inner pocket. Her eyes fastened upon it. It was a policeman's whistle.

"You see—I'm giving you a chance."

She took a deep breath. Her dark, watchful eyes grew troubled.

"Why?" she whispered, and her shoulders drooped.

Slade's mouth twisted. He rolled the whistle in his fingers.

"Shall we call it—thoroughness?"

She sighed heavily.

"Yours must be a sad life, Mr Slade. It

makes you rather labour a joke," she remarked lightly. "And that is not too good for your audience. However"—brightly—"you're wanting an explanation."

Her head inclined to one side, pertly.

Slade nodded, without taking his eyes from her face.

"Well, it's simple. I didn't do it!"

Her accompanying smile was flippant, counted to fascinate.

But Slade was the hardest man in the world to rile.

"Simple—I agree. Too simple!"

Her graceful figure slumped back into her chair. A white hand swept the air with an abrupt gesture.

"You can't frighten me, Mr Slade. Really, you can't."

Slade raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"You ought to realize," she answered, "that a blackmailer would scarcely murder a profitable prospect. The moral of the goose and the golden eggs, you know." She chuckled softly. "Besides, what about the letter?"

Slade did his best.

"It was posted in Sudley Abbott."

"Yes. But what time?"

"Eleven forty-five."

"Now, now, Mr Slade," she murmured reprovingly, and tossed her head, "how can you persist in being so tiresome? Really!"

Slade grinned sheepishly.

"All right," he said, "P.M. But you're dancing on thin ice."

Her smile was ravishing.

"Thin ice is surprisingly stable at times. And so long as it holds—what matter?"

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There was a short silence, broken only by the ticking of two wrist-watches.

"An *alibi*—eh?"

"Test it," she invited dreamily.

Slade gave it up.

Putting the whistle back in his pocket, and picking up the revolver, he rose and crossed to the sideboard. With his left hand he poured out a stiff glass of the tawny spirit.

He drank it slowly. He needed it. The woman watched him as he set down the half-emptied glass.

"My handkerchief—if you would be so good."

Slade drew the crumpled ball of silk from his pocket and handed it to her.

"And my handbag? Please."

He gave it her.

She carefully repencilled her lips and daubed her face and neck with a small powder-puff. Then she lit another cigarette.

"Those others," she inquired easily, quite sure of herself again, "won't they be getting anxious?" After a pause: "I can imagine nothing more tiresome than a fretful policeman."

By way of answer Slade jabbed down the siphon lever. It was ten minutes to two. He thought of Sir Royston.

As he sipped the drink he regarded the woman narrowly. The black velvet mask was not altogether unattractive. He imagined it covering a shapely, dominant nose and a forehead broad and . . . Her eyes met his gaze, and held it.

Seconds ticked by. Each was summing up the other—and comparing. A new warmth glowed in the woman's eyes. A new chill glazed the man's.

Those two minutes were the most trying of all.

They were suddenly startled by a ringing of the 'phone-bell.

In an instant the detective had his hand on the receiver.

But the woman had sprung to her feet. Her dark closely shingled hair glistened blue-black in the soft light. The man in Slade admitted her charm. Still, he wasn't perturbed.

"You forget——" he began.

"No—wait!"

Again the 'phone-bell rang.

"Well?" His tone was a little short.

"I have an offer——"

"No doubt!"

The words left nothing to the imagination.

He picked up the receiver.

"Listen!"

Her tone arrested him.

"Allow me to take that call and I'll——"

"Take off your mask!"

Slade regretted the gibe the moment it was uttered. The woman flinched visibly, but came a couple of steps nearer.

"No"—Slade saw the gleam of her set teeth—"I'll not take off my mask for you or any man until it pleases me!" The shadowed eyes looked past him. Her arms hung flaccid at her sides. "But—I'll tell you who murdered Sir Giles Gillespie!"

Slade seemed to act on the spur of the moment, but indeed he acted only after an intense effort of calculation. In a fraction of a second he discarded the very hypothetical advantage that might accrue from answering the 'phone in favour of the revelation promised by the woman. He risked the chance that she was bluffing him. She was so much in earnest.

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And at the back of his decision there was also that feeling of certainty which is often called a 'hunch.' He relinquished the receiver, and she snatched it up to her ear. He heard the woman catch her breath sharply.

"No! No! Not here!" she said tensely into the microphone. "I can't explain why now. Where, then? Oh, anywhere! The farm!"

Slade stared at her dully. His fingers ached to snatch at the instrument. He picked up his glass and drained it.

"Not now! No! Later!"

Some one was evidently being very insistent about something. He heard the receiver clicked home, and looked round.

The woman was standing with her back to the sideboard, glaring at him.

"Yes?"

She did not answer. He put the glass on the table, and pushed it away from him. He was not a man to ask twice where once should be sufficient.

She seemed dazed, unable for the moment to collect herself or her thoughts.

His sharp look reminded her. Bodily she thrust herself from the support of the sideboard, and stood before him, swaying slightly. She did not attempt to fence. She recognized that it would have been of no use.

"Lionel Gillespie—his brother!"

The hollow voice filled the room, and seemed to startle her as much as the detective. She staggered to a chair and fell into it, inert.

Slade's eyes grew wide. He did not question the truth of the statement—he was too occupied with observing the woman. She was rocking herself gently

to and fro, her lips sucked in, her whole attitude revealing mental strain. He heard her breathing heavily.

A moment, and then she sprang to her feet and burst out passionately:

"He's nothing to me, I tell you! Nothing—nothing!" Something caught in her throat and choked her. Her voice trailed to a thin hissing. "He never was—never!" The impediment melted, and she almost whimpered. "We're quits—now! Yes, quits! He—he was the debtor!"

Sudden as had been the storm in its bursting, as sudden was it in its passing. With a hand to her lips, to check the words trembling there, she turned half away.

Slade offered her a glass of spirit. When he turned back from the sideboard she was again seated in the chair, gazing into space. Mechanically she drank—in gulps.

The neat spirit braced her. She stared at Slade with filmy eyes, striving to gain the mastery of herself.

"Now you know—the truth! You'll get him—hang him—and you'll—— Yes, you'll come back for me!"

In other circumstances Slade might have smiled. As it was, however, he listened gravely. He was not alarmed. He was impressed.

"But—take care!"

She added the words in a different tone. He could not have described the difference—but he was aware of it.

He slipped the revolver into his coat pocket.

"The truth," he murmured; "although he died twenty years ago—abroad!"

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Her glance was hard. Slowly she repeated his words.

"Although he died twenty years ago—abroad!"

Thoughtfully Slade buttoned up his coat.

"Listen!" She chose her words with care. "You came here to-night for a reason I'm not sure of. And you waited. For another reason you preferred to draw a blank. Tell me, could you have drawn anything else?"

Slade felt his way with care.

"I came for a murderer—if he was here!"

"Not a murderess—eh?" Her short laugh was testy. She went on:

"Well, he wasn't. But—I was!"

"Yes—you were. I wonder!"

"What?"

"Why you were here."

She rested her head in her cupped hands, and regarded him with an inscrutable look.

"Perhaps—I was here to tell you."

"The name of the murderer?"

"Yes."

He shrugged.

"Perhaps—but I know better."

"Yes. You know better. I wonder just how much you do know! Remember, I said you'll come back!"

Slade turned his eyes.

"I'll remember. Also something of a threat—a warning to take care."

Her lips compressed to a thin line.

"You'll be wise to. Perhaps, after all, you don't know——"

"Yes?"

"—me!"

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His stern gaze came back to her eyes. The cold speculation in it chilled her. When he spoke his lips scarcely moved.

"No, I don't know you—other than as a velvet mask. But I know that to-night you have called an old debt quits." He paused reflectively, and she paled. "And I know that you are now bitterly regretting——"

The shaft was barbed. It struck on the raw.

"Never!"

She was on her feet, close to him. He caught the scent of lilac again.

Out in the darkness a car hooted three times.

She found vent for one word:

"Go!"

Again came the three short honks.

Slade turned on his heel and passed through the open window without another word.

CHAPTER VII: *Dr Bruce Receives Two Visitors*

SLADE snatched a brief four hours' sleep and a hasty breakfast. When he stepped outside the glass swing-doors of the Sudley Hotel it was exactly two and a half minutes to half-past eight.

It was the morning of the inquest, and he intended an early call on Dr Bruce. Slade had an idea that the Doctor might be of some use to him at the inquest, and possibly before it.

He still felt a bit tired. It had been close upon three o'clock when he had picked up the baronet and his car on the main road, and he had fallen asleep during the rapid drive into the town. Gillespie had been a brick, but Slade had refrained from telling him so on principle. There was still a lot to be done, and in a short time.

Dr Bruce, as the detective had discovered on the day before, lived in a neat little villa in Duggan Park Crescent, in the more recently built and more select quarter of the town.

He took a tram from the terminus at Queen's Road to as far as he could travel due west. Some ten minutes' walking brought him to Duggan Park Crescent.

There was no red-glassed lamp outside No. 9, Linden Lawn, for Dr Bruce's practice and surgery were in the more crowded and profitable district of the town known to the residents of the quarter as Rennel's Runt. Before the gate was drawn up a covered *coupé*.

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A neat, fresh-looking maid, with stiff-starched cap and cuffs, opened the door in answer to Slade's ring, showed him to a seat in the small, compact hall, and took his card.

In a few seconds she returned, somewhat flustered. The Doctor was at breakfast. If the detective—the gentleman—would kindly——

Slade cut short her apologies with a reassuring smile, and followed her into the dining-room.

The pale, almost colourless eyes of the bachelor master of the house blinked violently as the door closed behind the maid. He had been pouring out a second cup of coffee when the detective entered, and a large brown stain was now spreading over the white cloth. Slade's bluff "Good morning, Doctor!" had caused his hand to jerk.

Eggs, toast, and coffee were proffered in turn, but the detective declined them. However, he took the opportunity of filling his pipe and lighting up.

The talk was mainly about the weather until the Doctor pushed aside his cup, chose a cigarette, and leaned back in his chair. The maid entered and removed the breakfast-things. When she had retired Slade crossed his legs and put the first question of real interest.

"I should like to ask you, Dr Bruce, your candid opinion of how Sir Giles Gillespie met his death."

The Doctor was taken with a sudden fit of coughing, and screened his face with smoke before he replied.

"Well, Mr Slade, my candid opinion is that he was quite unprepared!"

Slade might have snorted at this deliberate fencing, but he didn't. He uncrossed his legs and drew his feet under his chair.

"Ah!" he said drily. "I've little concern with

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Sir Giles' spiritual state. It has no bearing on the case, and——"

He thought he heard a discreet chuckle, but it might have been a cough, for the Doctor's head was enveloped in another screen of smoke.

"—and so I think we can leave that out of the question. Don't you?"

"Ah—possibly! Possibly!"

"It may help you to candidness if I say that I'm not working with Inspector Collins. We represent different departments, and we go our different ways. You understand?"

"Quite. Quite," murmured the Doctor complacently, and tapped his cigarette against the ash-tray at his elbow.

"One might find it hard to confide in Inspector Collins, especially when he has preconceived ideas. I can't imagine him an easy colleague to work with."

The smoke thinned out, and Slade saw the pale eyes twitching nervously, staring at him.

He smiled ingratiatingly, and leaned forward. There was a note of confidence in his voice.

"Perhaps you have discovered as much?"

"Oh, absolutely, Mr Slade. Absolutely."

"In fact"—Slade lowered his voice to a whisper—"it is conceivable that in working with Inspector Collins one would be apt to keep some things to oneself, simply for the sake of keeping matters smooth. Don't misunderstand me, Doctor. But Collins has a manner that's apt to jar. He's rather given to—shall we say?—finding fault."

"Ah!" Dr Bruce crushed the stump of his cigarette under his finger and sat up quickly, as though to say something which had just occurred to

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him. But he must have thought better of it, for he sank back in his chair with another short "Ah!"

Slade was finding him harder to draw than he had expected. Perhaps as yet he hadn't touched the right note. He tried something a little deeper.

"Judging by the progress he's made, I fancy he wasn't too tractable over the examination at Grey-stones."

The pale eyes flickered, and Slade quelled a ridiculous desire to laugh out aloud. One of the Doctor's plump hands was plucking at his massive watch-chain.

"I don't"—the under lip pouted—"I don't quite get your drift, Mr Slade."

Mr Slade glanced at the other knowingly. This interviewing business was purely of a secondary nature, and was taking up more of his time than he had allowed for. There were other things which were more pressing.

"You're a doctor, Dr Bruce. And you were with Collins. Now, Collins has decided that what he first thought was suicide in actual fact was murder. And cold-blooded murder at that."

Dr Bruce sniffed, as though scenting something of what was coming, and flicked a speck of ash from the black expanse of his morning vest.

"I explained, of course, to Inspector Collins——"

"Exactly, Doctor! Just my point. You explained—just as far as was wise, without flatly contradicting our worthy friend."

"Ah!"

"Being a doctor, you knew that Sir Giles died of strangulation. You probably guessed that all that other on the terrace was a fake. But Collins didn't——"

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"Didn't? You mean——"

"He does now."

"Ah!"

"I told him."

"Oh!"

The two men stared blankly at each other for a couple of seconds. Then, by a common impulse, each suddenly burst into a loud laugh. The situation was irresistible.

Slade saw his way clearly after that.

In reply to the detective's inquiry, Dr Bruce explained that the arrangement at the inquest was for him to move the usual evidence in such a case—death from violent causes—and shovel the rest on to the broad shoulders of the Inspector, the letters and the later developments, to make what he pleased of them.

Slade heard him through, accepted a cigarette, and then abruptly changed the topic, tactfully hinting that he had not many minutes to spare.

"By the way, Doctor," he opened up, "it would be a help if you'd tell me what you know about the Gillespie family."

"I know very little," replied the other after a moment's cogitation, and, as Slade thought, a little evasively. "Few people know much. They're a queer lot. At least, I should say they *were* a queer lot. The strain's thinned out. There's only Sir Royston left now." After a pause: "And one other."

Slade settled back in his chair.

"What about the brother—Lionel?"

Dr Bruce studied the glowing tip of his cigarette before answering.

"He—he was the queerest of them all. He died

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abroad somewhere—years ago. There was quite a stir down here when his wife came back and settled down with his brother Giles. I believe the scandal of the time had it that she was an old sweetheart of Giles'. But I don't attach a great deal of importance to rumours."

"No, no, of course not," Slade hastened to put in. "But Sir Giles' wife—Sir Royston's mother—who was she?"

The Doctor patted the arm of his chair caressingly.

"Daughter of a neighbouring squire, and second fancy at best. It was Giles' father's match more than his, although the old man died before he married her. Giles wanted to marry Leatrice Dane, but the old man wouldn't give his consent. He didn't like the Danes well enough to let one of them become Lady Gillespie. Anyway, there was the usual family dust-up, and Giles packed off to the Continent. He had a bit of a fling, squandered a few thousands in Paris, and then no word was heard of him for a long time. It was while Giles was abroad that his brother married Leatrice Dane. Giles never forgave him—or his father. On the old man's death he succeeded to the title, and came home for about the third time in eight years. There was a City business to keep going and a rural reputation to live up to. A wife was the first consideration. The irony of ironies was when he married Bertha Summers, his father's choice of years before. But she didn't live long, barely a year. She died giving birth to Royston. And it's my opinion, Mr Slade"—the Doctor emitted a short sigh and a puff of smoke—"that it was for the best. He could not have made her happy. Sir Giles Gillespie was a disappointed man. The love of his life was Leatrice Dane."

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There was a short silence. It was Slade who broke it.

"Leatrice Dane—or one other," he said pointedly.

The Doctor took the cigarette from his mouth and intently regarded the back of his hand.

"One other?" he queried softly.

Slade nodded.

"Her daughter—Paula."

"Maybe." The tone was drawling and low. "I wonder!"

Dr Bruce lapsed into another silence, drawing softly at his cigarette. His next words continued the subject from where it had been dropped.

"Perhaps you're right, Mr Slade. I've often fancied that. It would explain a lot."

The minutes were flying, but Slade wasn't sure that he had learnt all that the Doctor could tell him. He saw that Dr Bruce was likely at this stage to become more reticent, and that it would be well to smooth the way a bit.

"You mean, Doctor, that that would account in some measure for his—queerness?"

The faded eyes once more began to blink quickly, as with returning interest, and the thin lips pursed.

"It might. The son could never get on with his father. But the ward—Miss Dane, as she was always to be called—could do almost anything she liked with him—at times."

"You imply that at times he found in the daughter something of her mother?"

"Yes. And at other times he found the father, Lionel Gillespie."

"You think that was what aged him, the conflict between the two?"

"I fancy so, Mr Slade."

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There was a pause for some little while after this. Then Slade ventured one more question.

"Which would you say dominated him most—the hate of the brother, or the affection for the brother's wife?"

"I can't say. I don't believe he knew himself. That was the whole trouble."

"But Leatrice Dane—she married the brother."

It was an objection. The Doctor took pains to explain.

"Yes—by some trick of old Sir Geoffrey's once Giles was out of the way. Old Geoffrey thought it'd bring Giles to his senses. Instead, it alienated the pair of them for ever. Giles found out how Leatrice had been tricked, and he never forgave either his father or his brother, but he had no reproach for Leatrice. When his brother died and the widow came back he was almost happy. She couldn't be his wife, of course, and in any case she didn't last long. Life as the wife of that wastrel and gambler, Lionel Gillespie, had exhausted her. Lionel Gillespie killed her as surely as if he'd stabbed her. You can imagine how it all would leave its mark on the man."

"I can imagine that—yes," Slade nodded.

"Sir Giles kept very much to himself. He was too soured for the county taste. Once or twice I've spoken to him, but I can't say my impression of him was at all agreeable."

Slade got to his feet and stretched his legs. A pendulum clock with a cheerful tick pointed to seventeen minutes to ten.

"Well, Doctor, I must thank you very much for——"

Dr Bruce came out of a reverie, collected his thoughts, and waved a hand depreciatingly.

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"Not at all, Mr Slade," he smiled, as he rose from the chair and smoothed his black tie.

Slade picked up his pipe and knocked out the ashes.

"Another hour, and then the inquest. Well, I must be going, Doctor. I'm afraid I've rather upset your plans——"

"Not at all! Not at all, Mr Slade," murmured the Doctor affably. "I'm very glad if I've helped you."

He seemed rather preoccupied as he gathered up some papers left by the maid, but Slade refrained from any comment. His problem at the moment was just what to do next. He had an appointment soon after twelve—in Simpson's Place. A glance at the morning's paper had shown him that one of the Ferret's fancies had come in for a place. It made things awkward, and tied him for time. But there was nothing else for it. It was his one chance of 'shaping up' to the Ferret—and, indirectly, the woman in the velvet mask.

He waited until the Doctor had rearranged his papers into two separate bundles and packed them in a small attaché-case.

As Dr Bruce put the case on the table and fastened it a short ring sounded at the front door.

Slade heard the footsteps of the maid—and a short exclamation which the Doctor attempted unsuccessfully to smother under his breath. There was the sound of a man's voice, harsh and insistent. Without more ado Dr Bruce, with a brief word of apology to Slade, went out to see what the caller wanted.

Slade, left to himself, stood kicking his heels and running his eyes over the little knick-knacks of the homely bachelor. From a stand of books he chose

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a volume at random. It was a leather-bound edition of *Moll Flanders*. He replaced it with a smile, and chose another from the lower tray. It was an old copy of a cheap reprint of *Surtees*.

He was browsing amusedly over one of the incorrigible Jorrocks's jaunts and its accompanying jollities when the door opened, and Dr Bruce came in, wiping his hands on a towel.

"I must apologize, Mr Slade," he began. "That fellow has a bullet wound in the fleshy part of the arm, and I had to dress it. Very queer. Says he was target-shooting in his garden, and a friend of mine who was there suggested his coming round here. Too much fuss and too many nosey parkers at the hospital, he said. Funny, though."

Once more the Doctor, a little out of breath, stayed to adjust his jet silk tie. He threw the towel on to the table and picked up the attaché-case.

Slade closed his book with a snap and replaced it on its tray.

"Did he mention his friend's name?" he inquired casually.

"Yes"—Dr Bruce was stooping to remove a couple of pieces of the rough-towel fluff from his immaculately creased trousers—"Smith. And that's the funny part about it. Strange as it may seem, I don't know a single person named Smith, now I come to recollect. Not one. Plenty of Browns and Joneses—but not a Smith. Queer, isn't it? Hardly believable."

Slade said he thought that it was very queer, especially as the man, whoever he was, had got the Doctor's address all right.

"By the way, who is he?" he asked.

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The Doctor's lips drew together, and he stammered lamely.

"Why, I—— Why, now you come to mention it, Mr Slade, I don't think I could have asked him. I don't remember doing so. And I don't think he told me himself."

Slade nodded. He couldn't recollect hearing the front door close while the Doctor had been absent, and he inquired if the man had gone.

"No. He's putting himself straight. I had to leave him, as time was getting on, but—— Ah, there he is if I'm not mistaken!"

From the other side of the hall came the sound of some one fumbling with a lock.

Slade stayed just long enough to pick up his hat and coat, both of which he had brought into the dining-room with him, and then followed Dr Bruce into the hall.

The front door was wide open, and the Doctor, with his silk hat set perfectly square on his round head, was shaking his late patient very vigorously by the left hand and offering him words of reassurance.

As the Doctor stepped back Slade saw that the man's right hand was tucked inside his overcoat. Then he caught sight of the stranger's face for the first time.

Slade turned away quickly before the man could see him.

Not many hours before he had seen the man in the glare of a headlamp, sitting on a tar-barrel by the roadside smoking a pipe.

It was—Jerry!

CHAPTER VIII: *In the Saloon Bar of the Jack o' Lantern*

IT was in one of those deserted, backwater roads, the kind made up of single-fronted houses, three stories high, with a couple of unclipped privet-hedges in the front gardens and basement windows on a level with the pavement, that Slade lost Jerry. A road called Cordwayne Terrace. It was disappointing, and Slade blamed himself for being over-cautious. But the milk was spilt, and he reminded himself that crying wouldn't help any—though he felt a much more natural inclination to swear. There was only one conclusion to be drawn, however. The man had disappeared into one of those houses. Slade had been following barely seventy-five yards behind. He had seen the man turn the corner, and had followed at the same pace as he had all the rest of the way from Duggan Park Crescent. When he had turned the corner it was to find a straight road of some two hundred yards before the first side-turning, and the man he was following nowhere to be seen.

There was nothing to be gained by remaining on a mere off-chance, so he philosophically accepted the inevitable and retraced his steps to the hotel.

A five minutes' private interview in the manager's comfortable room made matters considerably easier all round, and a quarter of an hour after he had finished a light lunch "Jim Ball," of Newmarket

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and Epsom, was permitted to use the staff entrance at the rear of the Sudley Hotel.

Ten minutes passed while he kicked his heels on the corner of Simpson's Place before the Ferret came ambling along. Meantime a constable who had strolled up on the opposite side of the street had paused to eye Slade curiously. The Ferret had almost passed him before Slade touched him on the shoulder lightly.

"Don't yer want the dibs?" he growled. "Or don't yer mind waitin'? Which?"

The Ferret returned the clap on the shoulder with a heartiness that made the bogus bookie's teeth rattle, and stuck a freckled stub of a nose in the other's face.

"Blimey, mate, I'd clean forgotten yer! 'Struth, I ain't even 'ad a squint at a blinkin' paper! One of 'em done the trick?"

Slade grunted a short assent, and pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip with a not too clean finger and thumb.

"Which one?"

"Sars'p'rilla."

"Win?"

Slade shook his head, and seemed to recover his spirits.

"Place—wiv nine runnin'. 'Ere yer are. 'Alf a dollar an' eightpence."

The money changed hands with a slickness that left the hovering policeman without a chance and the Ferret without a trace of suspicion.

Then the Ferret buttonholed Slade.

"'Ere, come an' 'ave a wash, matey. On me."

Inside the saloon bar of the Jack o' Lantern Slade sipped his beer and fished out the morning's paper.

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The Ferret, after several minutes' deliberation, picked a couple of horses for the Newdicup Stakes. He put down the paper, took a long drink, and produced a grimy ten-shilling note.

"Same again, mate," he said glibly. "'Alf a dollar each way—place an' win. 'Ere's the names an' prices—though I 'specs you knows 'em. Look."

Slade bent over the paper, and the Ferret indicated his fancies with a grubby forefinger.

"Broken Chalice—'undred ter eight. Wotever a broken one o' those is."

Slade scribbled down the name and price in his little black notebook.

"An' this 'ere 'un. High Tide—twenty-five ter one they've got 'im down fer. Looks as though it ought ter be 'Igh Time, but it ain't—not yet."

Slade closed his book and put it in his pocket, together with the dirty note. After another noisy sip at his beer he glanced over the racing programme the Ferret had been studying and raised an objection.

"Wot's up with ter-morrow?"

The Ferret removed his cap expressively and proceeded to rub his fingers in the tangle of red hair which fell over his low, receding forehead.

"Diff'rent shift, mate. Night-work."

Both tone and manner told Slade that the man was lying. The casualness was just that much too casual.

"Or the next day?"

"Can't be did. 'Ave ter make it the Newdicup day—one after."

They finished their beer together, and Slade called for the first refills.

He had just received his change and ostentatiously checked it—much to the pique of the red-faced

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barmaid—when the door was pushed open, and in strode Mick, looking thoroughly disgruntled. He dropped on to the form beside the Ferret and glared hard and long at Slade.

Slade looked at the Ferret and nodded his head.

“Pal o’ yourn?”

As a preliminary caution the Ferret first fastened a blunt paw round the glass Slade set before him, then grunted:

“Yus—’e is.”

Slade beamed unexpectedly.

“My treat, gents,” he announced informally, and planted the other glass in front of the Ferret’s companion. “Jimmy Ball’s round, this one. Lil’ ole Jimmy Ball, boys.”

He stepped back to the counter and got himself another foaming glass. When he came back Mick was drinking thirstily. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, took a deep breath, and glared at Slade harder than ever.

“You’re the fellow who was round here yesterday, ain’t you?” he said thinly, not altogether pleasantly.

Slade took it with a smile.

“Right! That’s me. ’Ere to-day, an’ ’ere to-morrow. An’ I lay evens any day. Man an’ ’orse, an’ a fair chance fer each, is my motter. An’ I know that Jim Ball’s money’s as good as any man’s in the kingdom—while it lasts.”

Mick closed one eye and swallowed another mouthful. Without rousing himself to put it into actual words he made it as plain as he could from his facial contortions that he preferred Slade’s beer to his business.

But Slade’s sunny smile seemed part of his stock-in-trade. He kept it well on view, although he was at the

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same time raking for something to say which would raise a discussion. If he could once get the two talking he would try his hand at turning the conversation. It was obvious that with Mick there, and nothing being said, the Ferret grew moody and untalkative.

He gave his attention to Mick.

"Where's the missus come from—Kilkenny?" he inquired lightly.

Mick's glare changed to a glower.

"What's the funning?" he growled thickly.

Slade rubbed his nose indelicately and grinned, unabashed by the other's overt surliness.

"I'm arskin'," he grinned, chaffing. "Looks as though she took a good bite—wot? When was it—last night?"

Mick's eyes grew narrower, and one hand stole to his damaged face. He couldn't have heard the Ferret's appreciative snigger as that gentleman buried his squat nose in his glass, for his attention was given to Slade.

"Your job's bookmaking, ain't it?" he said testily. "Well, take my tip, an' stick to it. Comic opera ain't in your line. Nor's fighting—from the looks of you."

Slade looked hurt.

"I didn't mean nothin', ole boy," he protested, sidling. "Can't yer tell a gent when yer sees 'im?"

Mick ignored the addition. Perhaps he wasn't sure.

"Well, don't!" he grumbled ominously. Then he caught sight of the Ferret's grinning face.

"And what's touched you?" he demanded, bristling, his mouth twisting down one side.

The Ferret straightened his rubber-like features

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as much as was physiologically possible and shifted round in his seat.

"Aw, chuck it, Mick! Can't a bloke 'ave a bit o' a joke wi'out yer turnin' rusty as screws? 'Tain't as if it'd spoilt any beauty," he added witheringly. "Besides, yer said yerself yer ole woman got 'andy with 'er mitts before yer cleared aht."

Mick, reasonably enough, took this with little show of grace, and the Ferret turned to Slade.

"No need ter take the 'uff, mate. 'E can't 'elp it at times. It takes 'im like that, all of a sudden like. Well, 'ere's 'ealth!"

He emptied his glass, and the others, taking the hint, followed suit. Then he pushed Slade's glass and his own along the table toward his companion.

"Your turn, Micky. Ditto repeat-o the same-o."

At the sight of Mick returning with the replenished glasses the Ferret expanded.

"Talkin' o' women an' Irish 'uns, reminds me o' me ole muvver. She were Irish. An' well the ole man knew it, too! Gawd! The on'y chance 'e 'ad o' a bit o' peace an' quiet was ter come 'ome blind-o, so's she could go down 'is empty pockets wivout a row. That's where I get me colour, mate."

He tapped his head with his left hand, and reached out for his glass with his right.

"'Er brother Rory—'e was a red 'un. Fag? Don't mind if I do."

He took the cigarette Slade offered and rummaged in his pocket for a box of matches.

Slade sucked the froth from the top of his glass with seeming relish, and held the glass up before his eyes.

"Not a bad drop—as it goes nowadays."

The Ferret filled the air with an acrid cloud.

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"No, 'tain't bad. Bit thin, though," he added critically.

Slade took a long drink, and set down his glass.

"Speakin' o' Irishwomen," he remarked reflectively, "I once knew an Irish girl meself—a publican's daughter."

"Oh—ay."

The Ferret settled back, glass in hand, to listen, while Mick, his right hand similarly employed, stared moodily at the brass rail in the thick glass window. They were the only occupants of the saloon.

"Yes, Sheila O'Mulligan was a lass in a million. Ankle an' eye an' hips, there ain't one o' these modern putty-legged pullets as could stand in the same room with 'er." Slade sighed as though the recollection cost him a pang. "She took after her father, though. Sean O'Mulligan had about as much pity as a pint o' his own poteen."

"What was 'is 'ouse?"

"The Cock an' Feathers—Deptford way, close to the creek, if yer know it. He'd a good business, too, with the off-licence an' all. But 'e tried ter make a book on 'is own, an' that did it. Got pinched takin' a bet across the counter."

Slade sighed heavily again, and straightway sought the consolation afforded by his sadly depleted glass. He seated himself beside the Ferret.

Mick was watching him with attentive eyes and ears.

He came across to the table and clinked his glass beside the others.

"I say, Bert"—he was addressing the Ferret—"that O'Mulligan he's speaking of, I knew him well. Knew his daughter too." He threw a savage glance at the bland-faced bookie. "Guess who nabbed him?"

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"Gawd knows!" said the Ferret fervently, half shutting his eyes to avoid the smoke from his cigarette.

"That fellow Slade you're crackers on. Hearing him talk"—he jerked a thumb in Slade's direction—"brought the name back to me."

"Slade! Blimey, I'd forgotten 'im since last night!"

The Ferret's greenish eyes widened, and roamed over his companion's face uneasily. His own freckled features puckered into innumerable crinkles.

"She laughed when I told 'er. You 'eard 'er, didn't yer? One o' 'er 'orrible laughs wot makes yer shiver. An' when I tried ter git a drink she cut up rough like that."

Mick laughed between his teeth.

"Can't say as I blame her, knowing you as I do, Bert," he said ungraciously.

The Ferret's eyes twitched. His thoughts were centred elsewhere.

"I ain't easy, Mick. I ain't! I knows 'im—know wot 'e's done ter others. You lot don't. An' you won't take advice till it's too late."

"Depends, of course, on the advice," said Mick cuttingly. "It's never too late to take some people's."

The Ferret's voice grew throaty. His Cockney spirit was roused.

"You think you know, don't you?" he said, in a voice suggestive of indiscreet dealings in pearls with pigs.

"No—not altogether," returned the other, with cold deliberation. "But I'm damned sure you don't!"

As he was about to flare up the Ferret caught the barmaid's scathing, daring eye. He opened his

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mouth wide to say something which was never uttered, and closed it with a harsh, grating laugh. The barmaid drew from under the counter a far from fresh-looking handkerchief and blew a vigorous note of victory.

To relieve his pent-up emotions the Ferret cleared his throat and expectorated deftly between his feet.

"All right, then, Mick, me boy," he said, with edged suavity, "I don't know. But can yer tell me this?"

He stopped to take the cigarette from his mouth.

"Why didn't she answer that 'phone-call from the garage—when we got back? Why didn't she—eh?"

Mick didn't seem inclined to express his views at the moment.

"Why did we 'ave ter take the stuff back ter the farm? Why couldn't she explain? Why did she answer at all like that? Eh? What's the matter?"

He fired the questions off, one after the other, with a certain amount of desperate delight.

Mick wetted his lips with his tongue.

"Funk. In that house all by herself. A woman. It stands to common sense."

"Nah! She ain't that kind. Not 'er! No ruddy fear!"

Slowly Mick's eyes came back to the other's face.

"What, then?"

The Ferret shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know no more'n you. But I'm thinkin' Slade's in it some'ow or other. It don't seem right, any'ow, fer that blasted skunk ter be skatin' roun' an' things goin' all right at the same time."

"Pah! You give me the squirms, with your——"

"Maybe," inserted the Ferret ruminatingly. "But

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talkin' about givin', wot I want ter know is who gave yer that face——"

"Blushin' angels! D'you think I'm a liar?"

"No. I know it was a winder, as yer said, Mick. Though 'tain't ev'ry one as'd believe that. But who broke the winder——"

"I don't know!" fumed Mick.

"—An' 'ow did 'e break it?"

"'Struth! I'm telling you I——"

"Don't know, I suppose," prompted the Ferret, with crude sarcasm.

"No, I——"

The Ferret tossed the stump of his cigarette on the floor with an expressive gesture, and leaned his elbows on the white deal table-top.

"Sam ain't 'ere now, is 'e?" he put in suggestively. "Nor the others? An' somethin' went funny last night. I'm thinkin', Mick, you'd better put it straight. Honest, was it Slade?"

It was several seconds before Mick replied.

"I—think—so," he said slowly, scarcely moving his lips. "I saw a face at the window—afterward. But I can't be sure."

"A gun?"

"Ye-es."

"I knew it. It's 'im! 'E's smelt some'at! 'Ow'd it come about?"

Mick looked gloomy and down in the mouth.

"I went there to see that butler johnny, Thorne. It was him that told me Slade was there—up in the room with the body. He seemed a bit jumpy. So I shinned up a vine or something on that side—it was drawing in dark by that time—and worked up under the sill. He was looking at the body pretty close—examining the clothes. Then he starts

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walkin' about. I hugs close to the wall, but the next I know is the room's in darkness and the glass is falling all over me, from the window above——"

"Above?" queried the Ferret sharply.

"Yes." Mick sounded sullen. "He must have fired high—on purpose!"

"On purpose!"

"He couldn't have missed at four yards!"

"Blimey!" It was plainly beyond the Ferret's comprehension. "But—but what for?"

"Don't know. 'Less it was to——"

"Hah?"

"Pink me—ticket me!"

"Phee-ew! An' 'e's watchin'—'e's watchin'!"

Mick smiled wryly. The Ferret's spells of panic were not altogether without their leavening of humour.

"He's watching all right! But God help him if he watches too close!"

Mick smacked his lips significantly, and the Ferret's green eyes glinted with a wild, half-terrified light. There was no mistaking the other's meaning.

"'E's 'ell, Mick. The devil's 'is kid brother. 'E did for Waldy Klein an' 'is sparkle-whizzers—a job one size too big for the Yankee cops, that. I don't like it, Mick. I ain't up against Slade—an' stayin' there."

Mick spread his arms and jeered uncharitably. The Ferret was making him feel more uncomfortable each instant, and not a little irritable.

"You're going gritty, Bert. That's what's the matter with you. You've got that confounded busy on the brain, an' he's finishing off an easy job. You're going ripe. What you'll be like when we

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get another summer and the sun starts shining as though he was paid for it——”

“Chow it, Mick. What’s eatin’ yer? ’Ere, d’yer think that butler up at Greystones is a busy?”

Mick’s face fell. He looked startled.

“A—a busy?” he faltered, unable for the moment to grasp the full purport of the other’s words. “What, one of Slade’s men?”

The Ferret seemed panicky at his own suggestion, and his companion’s way of taking it did not tend to reassure him.

“Ye-es, I s’pose so. It jest occurred ter me—what if ’e was! What d’you think, Mick?”

Mick didn’t, for the moment, know what to think, much less express it in so many words. But the Ferret persisted. He wanted reassuring.

“Eh, Mick? What d’you think abaht it?”

Mick raised his head heavily, a solemn, hard light in his eyes.

“This. If he is—he’s got to go! Get me?”

He spoke in a low, tense whisper.

The Ferret sat stockstill.

“Yus!” he breathed.

Mick’s body inflated as he took a deep breath.

“And Slade—if he tries to spoil things. He won’t—because he doesn’t know enough! But if he should happen to chance on something—if he has chanced on something . . . As you said yesterday, Bert, if he starts any old hanky-panky, well, there’s nothing else for it—it’s him too!”

This was delivered in a dramatic undertone. Then a little more freshly and eagerly:

“Agree?”

The Ferret’s head nodded ponderously. He seemed fascinated by something in the other’s words.

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Mick, on the other hand, seemed anxious to leave no misunderstanding in the other's mind.

"I'll tell Sam an' the other two when I get back," he went on. "And as she said herself last night, we mustn't run a single risk of being baulked in getting the stuff all circulated. It'll take another five nights at the soonest, even with Jerry back, but we've got to go more careful than ever now in distributing. Somebody's let out something. Jerry had to run for it last night—got turned back with a bullet in his arm. Says it was the Flying Squad!"

"Flyin' Squad—'ell!" croaked the Ferret hoarsely.

"Yes, you bet it'll be hell—an' hotter!—if we don't dodge 'em!"

The words may have been delivered as a solemn announcement, or they may very well have constituted something in the nature of a threat.

The Ferret placed a shaky hand on Mick's arm, which that person didn't take the trouble to shake off.

"The garage—d'you think they've rumbled it?"

Mick shook his shoulders, but didn't meet the other's eyes. They held a question he didn't want to answer.

"Shouldn't think so——"

"But—Slade—'im!"

Mick patted his plastered cheek.

"I'm not forgetting Mister Slade—no, by God! He ain't going around spoiling things now if I can help it! Five solid months it's taken to get this business together, and now we're getting the stuff planted safe and sure. There's a fortune in this if we can keep it up a bit. It's only a case of transporting the goods. And that ought to be easy enough, if we can only keep things clear this end."

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"Yus, it ought ter be. But I ain't sure, Mick." The Ferret seemed troubled by an eternal doubt. "It was that blasted suicide——"

"Sure?"

"Sure wot?"

"It was a suicide."

"Eh? The papers——"

"Ugh! The papers!" broke in Mick contemptuously. "They put in what they're told to, and not a line more. Remember the Montassi case? That was worked through the Press. He thought it was all right from the report in the papers. But they were waiting for him as soon as he brought his nose out into the light, weren't they?"

"Wot're yer drivin' at, Mick?"

"Ain't it plain—without any driving? Slade came down here to look up a case of suicide—although why they couldn't have left it to the locals I don't know. Say two hours' work at the outside. He's still down here, two days after. It can only mean one thing of two. Either the suicide ain't a suicide—but a murder! Or—he's got wind of something else!"

"Us!"—tremulously.

"Course! Ain't he seen you—and ain't he been up at Greystones a lot? Don't forget that Thorne's got some stuff up there. Remember?"

"Gawd! So 'e 'as, Mick! Wot we gonna do?"

"Nothing! Just sit tight and wait! Rushing things won't help any—not at this stage. 'Sides, I don't see the need. Nor does she."

The Ferret's hand wandered to the crumpled collar round his throat.

"But the stuff—it's gotta be shifted!"

Mick whistled a couple of bars of ragtime.

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"Jerry's trying again to-night," he announced gravely. Then went on with his tune.

"Jerry! You say 'e's crocked!"

The tune trembled and died on a high, wavering note.

"Sam's going with him. So'm I."

"An' me?"

"You've got to wait up for us."

"Where—the farm?"

"No—Number Eleven."

The Ferret sniffed, unsatisfied.

"Who's arranging this, Mick?"

"Her. Why?"

"Nothin'. Which car?"

"The Daimler, I s'pose."

"D'you think you'll get through? Bet yer life an' lungs they'll be on the look-out arter last night."

"We ought to. Jerry said he's going to take a short cut across the common and strike the road below Polbridge. It'll take a bit longer, but it ought to prevent any hitch."

"An' 'er?"

"She's at Number Eleven, and likely to stop there from what I gather. Been 'phoning up the crowd the other end this morning. They're going to meet us about three miles the other side of Polbridge."

"Where's Jerry an' Sam now?"

"Sam's at the farm. Jerry's at Number Eleven. His arm got painful, so she sent him round to somebody at the other end of the town—Duggan Park something or other—with a tale about an accident in the garden. He's back now, getting a nap."

The Ferret opened his mouth to say something, when the door was pushed open, and the policeman who had eyed Slade suspiciously entered.

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He gave a quick, apprehensive glance at the occupants of the saloon, then squared his shoulders and crossed with heavy tread to the bar.

It was plain that he was expected. A small, narrow-necked glass, half filled, was pushed across the counter. It had evidently been held in readiness. A siphon too was placed at his disposal. He barely pressed the lever.

Previous transactions of a similar nature had placed him upon a certain intimacy with the worldly-wise barmaid, whom he addressed as Florrie.

Jocularly he asked her if she knew the time.

"It wants two and a half minutes yet, Mr MacPhea," she replied demurely, at the same time polishing a glass with dexterous turns of her cloth.

As the bulky-framed Mr MacPhea drained his glass a man's voice was raised in the next bar.

"Time, gen'lemen! Time, please!"

The barmaid added her soprano squeak.

"Time, please, gentlemen."

The constable, leaning on his elbows against the bar-counter, watched the Ferret and Mick get cumbrously to their feet. They didn't hurry.

"Better give him a poke," he grinned, pointing to the heavily breathing form of Slade, hunched back on the form against the wall.

Mick smothered an imprecation, and glanced at the Ferret.

"How long's he been asleep?" he muttered, with evidence of alarm.

"Gawd knows!" The Ferret resorted to his usual stock formula when stumped. "Fergot all about 'im! Shouldn't say as 'e's any too comfortable perched up like that. Couldn't stick it meself. 'Ere, Mick, give us a 'and aht wiv 'im. Time's up,

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and that there copper's lookin' as though 'is booze is all a-goin' ter 'is nose."

Each took a hold on one of Slade's shoulders. They gave him an unceremonious shake and a lift in the same movement.

He started to his feet and flung out his arms defensively.

"Think yer can come the bit an' bridle with lil' Jimmy Ball—eh? Yer knock-kneed, two-ounce, chaw-de-groy bouncers! Lemme getta——"

They got him outside, between them, before Mr MacPhea could interfere, and once the bar door had slammed behind them didn't stop until they had marched him half-way down the street. Slade rubbed his eyes until they were red and bleared, and blinked like an untimely awakened owl when they finally unpinioned his arms. His demeanour was crestfallen, his apologies abject.

"'Struth, mates, sorry to 'ave bin a trouble. Must have dozed off. Funny. Don't ever remember doing it before in me life. It was warm in there, though. Thought fer the minute you were a couple o' gangsters. Can't make it out. Couldn't a bin the beer, either. Was a bit tired, must admit. That cop, though—he looked fair fits, didn't 'e? Real smoulderin' like, judgin' by 'is nose. Lordy, my neck's stiff as a bridle rein at the last lap."

The Ferret eyed Mick, and Mick eyed the Ferret. Neither spoke. Slade babbled on like the perennial brook.

"Thanks fer the lift, mates. Much 'bliged. Newdicup three days' time. All right. See me round 'ere the day after fer sure. Take a trot down ter Newmarket, p'r'aps, ter-morrow. See what ole Slopey Mallers 'as ter say about the November trials

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as is comin' orf soon. Sure ter meet some o' the boys. An' if there's——"

Mick caught the Ferret by the arm and half dragged him away. Slade was patting out his ruffled muffler and fixing the bent brim of his shapeless hat.

"So long, mate," sang out the Ferret. "Don't ferget the prices. 'Undred ter eight an' twenty-five ter——"

Mick cut him short with a sharp oath.

"Sling your damned hook!" he flung at Slade, his feelings at last getting the better of him. "I've had about enough o' your blasted monkey-ing—enough ter last, I tell you! Beat it! Stick your infernal cracked mug under a tap, an' give it a rinse out, you——"

Slade caught a glimpse of the substantial figure of Mr MacPhea stepping toward them. He didn't stop to make sure of Mick's parting compliment, although as he stepped into the road the word sounded very much like "stable-pimp."

CHAPTER IX: *Slade Sets the Stage*

As the 5.28 steamed to a standstill under the high glass canopy of St Pancras station Slade, neat and spruce, green leather attaché-case in hand and pipe in mouth, opened the door of a first-class compartment and stepped lightly on to the platform.

The first eddies of the northward-bound stream of City workers were swirling about the barriers as the detective gave up his ticket and turned aside to the cab-rank. The minute hand of the large-dialled clock over the main entrance was barely on the half-hour.

Five minutes later Slade's taxi had cleared a nasty traffic block at the Holborn crossing and was bowling down an uncongested Kingsway.

A faint mist hung over the sluggish, ebbing waters of the Thames, and as the taxi sped under Hungerford Bridge Slade caught sight of a lamplighter, long pole on shoulder, busy on his round of lighting up the London twilight.

He dismissed his driver at the Yard gates.

As Big Ben rumbled out the last quarter Slade softly closed a door behind him, and as the first booming stroke of the hour tolled through the deep grey dusk outside he moved into the circle of light.

Across the sloping top of a rather high desk two steel-grey eyes, calm and coolly calculating as his own, regarded him intently for a brief moment.

"Got the telegram all right, then, Slade?"

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"Yes, sir," answered the detective crisply, yet respectfully. "I travelled up straightaway."

The large head nodded and a white hand indicated a near-by chair. Slade seated himself and opened his attaché-case.

"One thing's certain, Chief," he remarked, as he drew forth a neatly tied sheaf of papers. "I went down to investigate a suicide—and I've come back to report on a murder."

Again the large head nodded. Anthony Slade knew his chief well; a man who preferred other men to be like himself—of few words.

"I see."

As Slade extracted the bundle of papers and placed them on the desk the Chief stretched out a hand and pressed a button.

"My report up to date," said Slade shortly.

The Chief picked up the bundle and turned it over in his hands. He appeared about to make a remark when the door opened and a sharp-featured constable drew himself to attention.

"You'll tell Mr Brawley to come to me as soon as he arrives."

"Very good, sir."

The door closed once more. Slade glanced up at the face of his chief. Something was in the wind. What was it?

"Now!" The iron-grey head was lowered over the desk, and one hand drew queer-shaped cones and prisms on a writing-pad with the stump of a yellow pencil.

Briefly the detective sketched what had happened since he had last sat in that room and had been shown the dead baronet's letter.

As he proceeded the thin hand gripping the pencil

stump moved faster over the paper, and the shading became blacker and thicker, the outlines bolder.

When Slade had finished the Chief took several seconds to complete to his satisfaction some particularly intricate design, and then the pencil clattered among the pens on the inkstand.

"Have you got any idea who the woman is?"

The question was put with a startling suddenness and a pointedness wholly characteristic of the man.

"No, Chief."

He might have added, "Not yet," but refrained. There was no need to make shift with the obvious. Instead, he remarked hopefully:

"You mentioned that Brawley would be doing some sifting, Chief. I suppose nothing's come out of it?"

"Nothing! Brawley's been engaged elsewhere."

The Chief spoke a little sharply, but Slade, wise in the ways of his superior, knew from his manner that it was because of something else which he had on his mind. Perhaps that something was what he had thought was "in the wind." Perhaps, also, it was the reason for his being summoned back to the Yard.

After a short space the Chief tore the top sheet of paper from the writing-pad, screwed it into a tight ball, and tossed it into a three-parts-filled wastepaper-basket.

Then he put a question.

"Do you believe that about the brother being the murderer?"

Slade braced himself.

"I believe that she was speaking the truth—as she understood it."

A pause.

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"But that she was under a misapprehension?"

"I'll not go so far as to say that on the present evidence, Chief. What I do believe is that the brother Lionel is connected with the case somehow. Where he is, I don't know. But I feel certain that he's earned the woman's spite, and what's more, that he's in England. The case is developing a real interest."

The Chief's features relaxed into a smile.

"That's something of an admission, coming from you, Slade," he remarked genially. And then his manner changed again.

"You haven't learnt what those 'goods' are that this woman and her associates are so anxious of moving quickly?"

Slade was compelled reluctantly to shake his head.

"No. I'd hoped to have learnt something to-night."

The Chief looked up and glanced at Slade keenly.

There came a low tap at the door, and some one entered. Slade looked round. The broad-shouldered man with the thick bull-neck and the dark, swarthy features was his colleague in criminal-catching. Abe Brawley might very well have been taken, apart from his stature, for an Armenian Jew. His name, his dark colouring, the sleekness of his straight, black hair, and the savage, predatory hook of his nose were all suggestive of the Levant. But there was a light in his deep brown eyes which gave an inkling of the truth. Abe Brawley came of old Dissenter stock—Worcestershire Quakers.

He saluted the Chief and gave a friendly nod in Slade's direction.

"The Squads are ready for to-night, Chief. If that gang's going to give us another run they'll have

to be a bit slicker this time. Last night was pretty close work."

By way of answer the Chief addressed himself to Slade.

"Brawley's on the track of a gang who've been doing some night-work on the North Road. What they're up to we're not sure. But we think they've been passing something on to some others, who've been meeting them."

Slade had an inspiration. He turned to Brawley.

"You didn't happen to come up with this gang last night, did you? Somewhere north of a place called Polbridge."

Brawley stared at him, his manners for the moment forgotten in his amazement, while the Chief flashed him a sudden, surprised glance.

"As it happens—he did happen," was his way of putting it, as he regarded both men with a quizzical expression.

Slade lowered his eyes from the frankly curious gaze of his fellow-detective. The Chief was still watching him closely.

"And there was some shooting?"

"There was. I could have sworn the fellow at the wheel sagged when we decreased the range. They shot us a puncture."

"He sagged all right. You pinked him in the muscle of his driving arm."

Slade was aware that both men were staring hard at him. A slight frown creased the Chief's broad forehead. Brawley gave way to his feelings so far as to jingle some loose change in a trouser-pocket.

"All I know about it is there." Slade pointed to his hastily drawn up report. "I saw that driver this morning. He had his arm dressed for a

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bullet-wound. All the same, I'm pretty sure he'll be on the road again to-night."

The Chief picked up Slade's report and tapped it with a forefinger.

"I'll go over this to-night, Slade. Meantime"—he motioned Brawley to draw up a chair and be seated—"we'll get this straightened out now."

Slade went over the events of the morning and the subsequent conversation at the Jack o' Lantern in detail. The Chief listened with an air of grave attention, while Brawley, for his part, endeavoured to fit in Slade's story with his own experiences of the night before. At length Slade arrived at the point where he had made his way back to the hotel and discovered the Chief's telegram awaiting him. His report, which, he explained, had been drawn up in the main during odd moments at meal times, he had completed in the train.

The Chief then put one or two questions on points arising from the narrative, and then spun round in his chair and faced Brawley.

"Does this description fit your own?"

"Yes, as far as it goes. Place, time, and car tally. Yellow, certainly. A Daimler."

The Chief jotted down something on the writing-pad at his elbow and picked up the telephone-receiver.

"Hullo! Oh, is that Burke? Ah! Is Handley there? He is? Good! Tell him that Mr Slade is in. He'd better stand by."

He put down the receiver and looked across at Slade, his eyes screwing into his head.

"You asked Handley to look up something, I believe? 'Phoned him up."

"I did, sir."

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The Chief pushed back his chair from the desk, stretched his legs, and sat forward with his elbows propped on the chair-arms, his hands clasped in front of him.

"He's got something interesting to show you," he went on, his sensitive mouth puckering at the corners. "You'd better go along in a few minutes."

His chair creaked, and he made a short gesture toward Brawley.

"What are your plans for to-night, Brawley? Perhaps Slade can offer a suggestion."

He looked from one man to the other.

Brawley sat back with his hands in his pockets.

"The patrols are out, and there oughtn't to be any hitch in the follow-up—if they try to get through again. If it's cut and run it won't be a getaway—not to-night!" said the detective grimly. "Seems to me the only point where Mr Slade can help us is on the placing of the inner patrols. The outer are covering the main road west of Sudley Abbott."

The Chief nodded thoughtfully.

Brawley turned to his colleague and continued:

"What d'you suggest?"

Both the Chief and Brawley awaited the other's answer with some show of anxiousness. Neither was quite sure how much Slade really knew.

Slade, however, wanted first to see his way clearly.

"How did you get on to this gang, Brawley?" he asked.

"One of 'em tried a squeak. We got a letter a couple of days ago. It was evidently a try-out, for we haven't received anything further. It may be, of course, that the gang got wind of something and have put a stop to it."

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Slade nodded slowly. He remembered the Chief's question of a short while before.

"Who are the gang? What are they up to?"

It was Brawley's turn to shake his head. His dark eyes narrowed.

"We don't know who they are. All we know is that they're being bossed by a woman—which won't do 'em any good. We haven't spotted their game yet. We only know what the letter told us, and that's precious little. Seems they're ready to shoot their way out if necessary. All of which won't make it any easier for 'em when the right time comes," he finished up significantly.

Slade's lips drew in at the corners.

"They know the Flying Squad's on to them," he said dubiously. "Saw the winged hands on the radiator, I suppose. That'll put 'em on the look-out."

Brawley's shoulders lifted an inch.

"Yes, they know the Squad's on to 'em." He spoke between his teeth. "They're goin' to be certain of it presently."

Slade turned to the Chief.

"That telegram, Chief. There's something you want me to——"

"Hah!"

For a moment the Chief appeared undecided about something. He pulled open one of the lower drawers of his desk and took out a folded newspaper and a letter. Slade saw that some of the paragraphs of the former were ringed in blue pencil.

"I'm undecided whether to keep you on this case or not. You say Collins knows it's a murder case, and that he's following up his own ideas—which should release us. On the other hand, you've stumbled on something which might mean combining

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with Brawley here. I don't know! There's something else I rather wanted you to look into. Here's one of yesterday's papers, with an article slating us for not rounding up those coiners I spoke of a week or so ago. And here's a letter, too, from Superintendent Keith. He says the North Midland Counties Bank has had spurious coin foisted on them to the tune of twelve thousand. That's the third bank in about as many months. The affair's getting serious. I don't mind the Press, of course. That signifies nothing, their blathering. But when——"

He paused a moment, hesitated another, then slipped both letter and newspaper back into the drawer, and closed it with more noise than was needful.

When he spoke again he had made his decision.

"For the present you and Brawley had better carry on. Keith'll have to do the best he can by himself in the meantime. I leave you to make your own plans. If they mean returning to Sudley Abbott, Slade, I suppose you'd better go. We can't very well undertake an investigation and drop it when the trouble begins. It wouldn't do our reputation any good. I don't suppose, either, that Collins has any too close a grip on affairs there, eh?"

He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

"Well, gentlemen, I'll say good-night. I'll attend to your report at once, Slade."

Both men bade him good-night and left the room. Slade followed Brawley into the latter's office. They went over piece by piece the preparations that had been made. Slade found a road-map, and together they studied the lie of the country and ticked off in red ink the path across the common Mick had mentioned to the Ferret. Brawley rose and got

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down some large leather-bound tomes from a shelf which ran round two sides of the room, and after several minutes of holding fingers on cross-references found that the house where Slade had met the woman in the velvet mask was called Rocks Dallow. They agreed to have that neighbourhood put under strict surveillance. There was no ready means of finding the name of the owner of the estate on which Rocks Dallow was built, so Brawley scribbled a hasty note to one of his assistants.

Then they discussed their method of approach, direction, and number of men, and Slade suggested ringing up Sir Royston Gillespie and asking him to accompany them, as the baronet knew practically every inch of the country, certainly every by-road.

After the chase at Polbridge, whatever its outcome, Slade moved that they should concentrate their forces on a raid on Jallop's Farm. It was admittedly a firm measure, and at first Brawley demurred, but Slade gave his argument again, and he finally agreed. After settling one or two minor points Brawley left the room to get the warrant made out.

Meantime Slade got a trunk-call through to Greystones, after some delay. When Brawley returned he had just put up the receiver. Sir Royston, he informed his colleague, had promised to be awaiting them at the small creek which ran under the road a few hundred yards below the second milestone. The common, the baronet had directed Slade, lay on the left of the road when approaching the town, and the creek was a small one which trickled close by Jallop's Farm. Years before its swollen waters had supplied the now silent water-wheel of the mill with its power.

Brawley replaced the books on the shelf, folded

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up Slade's map, and picked up his own hat and coat. From an inside pocket he drew out a dark-coloured automatic, and made sure that the magazine was in order. Then he put it in his overcoat pocket.

"I'll be waiting outside," he said. Slade explained that he was going to hunt up Handley for a few seconds, after which he would be ready. Brawley nodded, and volunteered to get some sandwiches, as Slade had missed a meal.

A cheerful gas-fire was purring in Handley's room when Slade walked in, with no other announcement than a short "Hullo!"

The sole occupant of the office rose to welcome his self-announced visitor cordially.

Slade explained that he was, first, in a hurry, secondly, that he had come to hear something which would not take more than a minute in the telling, and almost in the same breath declined a cigarette.

"What's the little wonder the Chief hinted you're keeping up your sleeve, Jack?"

Handley's smooth red face grinned like a school-boy's. He lit a cigarette before replying.

"About a certain Lionel Gillespie, ain't it? If I got the name right. Say, Tony, you're busy raking up the dim and dismal past, ain't you?"

He got down a file and sorted over several loose leaves. Then he undid the clasp and extracted one, and passed it to Slade for his inspection.

Slade read it through in silence. Suddenly he glanced up.

"You showed this to the Chief?"

Handley nodded affably, with mock indolence.

"Yep. You said if anything came out of it, you know, I was to take it into the——"

"H'm—yes."

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Slade again glanced down at the typed sheet.

LIONEL GILLESPIE, son of Sir Geoffrey Gillespie, Bart., England. Height: 5 ft. 11½ ins. Hair: light brown. Clean-shaven. Eyes: brownish-hazel; medium. Teeth: good. Linguist: French (fair), Italian (fair), German (excellent). Reported dead in Italy. Later reports: New York, Chicago (Veiser-Massé Syndicate), 1912. Paris: April-June 1913; wanted by French police in connexion with disappearance of original documents pertaining to Louvain Defensive and Offensive Armaments and Mobilization Enactments—see Schedule C4, Section No. 26. Berlin: November 1913-March 1914 (*alias* Herr Heinrich Strüber, Baron von Bohmfenstal). London: April-June 1914; Teutons Club. Wanted January 1915 as suspected German agent (*alias* John Beringer). Received instructions *via* Mdlle Aimée Dolziev (Belgian actress, Brussels; believed of Polish extraction—see Ref. ATR. 4M. viii). Royd-Biffen Naval Gunnery Depot, plans duplicated; warrant made out. Further instructions *via* Mdlle A. Dolziev intercepted. Disappearance March 1915. Plans recovered; instructions *via* Mdlle A. Dolziev. Warrant reissued August 1915.

Memorandum: G. 2065.

Paula Dane's father—a German spy!

On the instant Slade's alert brain was asking the question: Had Sir Giles known?

And if he had . . .

He hastily caught himself up. If Sir Giles had! Did there lie the motive for his murder? Had the woman's words, after all, been the truth?

He thought of the long lapse of time since 1915, when Lionel Gillespie, according to the *dossier*, had disappeared. And those letters!

Always those letters. They at least were

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tangible—true. No amount of applied reasoning could explain away their significance.

He remembered the masked woman's tense, nervous struggle for self-command. She had made a bargain—a sorry one, no doubt. But she had stuck to it. She believed Lionel Gillespie to have murdered his brother. So far Slade had no more evidence than her word. But he had an unreasonable feeling that she was wrong. Whoever Lionel Gillespie was, whoever he was posing as, she knew that much. Through her, eventually, Slade might hope to get at the truth.

But—who was she?

He didn't know. Brawley didn't know. He wondered if the Ferret and the others knew. As Brawley had said, and as he himself had already guessed, she was the head and brains of the gang.

And the gang—what was it up to? Was—he hesitated—was Lionel Gillespie connected with the gang?

It was a wild shot—he realized that, and valued it as such. But he was temporarily at a loss. In a short while he might know more. The net was being drawn tighter. The stage was set. And he knew instinctively that one of the chief figures on the stage would be the woman in the velvet mask.

He thought of Sir Royston, and remembered Dr Bruce's words about the queer strain in the Gillespies thinning out. He thought also of Thorne—the 'queer' butler.

Slade handed the file-sheet back to Handley without any comment, and the latter replaced it in its section and put the file-case back on the shelf.

When Handley turned round Slade was staring abstractedly at the little tongues of purple flame

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which lapped the asbestos centre of the gas-fire. Handley gave the detective an odd look.

"Have we found out that friend Gillespie is up to something fresh, Tony? Or is it just a pot-shot at squaring old arrears?"

Slade did not answer. He looked at the other absent-mindedly.

Handley shifted his cigarette to the other side of his mouth and screened his eyes from the smoke.

"What's making you speed things up like this, old man? Thought you were going to try a rest cure for the fidgets or something. So the rumour got about."

Slade smiled thinly, but his eyes were grave.

"What made you ask that, Jack?" he said at last. Handley looked up.

"About the rest cure?" he grinned.

"No. About speeding things up."

"Why, man," expostulated the other, "I should think it's pretty obvious. Isn't it? You 'phone me yesterday to hunt up something. I get on to it, and, as you told me, report to the Chief. He tells me to wait for you. Then he rings me up and tells me you're here, and that you'll be in to see me shortly. Very good. Two minutes before you come in he rings me up again with orders to lose no time in circulating a description of this Mr Lionel Gillespie—whoever he is—as we have it, not forgetting to add dates. Now, I ask you——"

"Circulate his description!" broke in Slade.

"Yes, and he was pretty keen on it, it seemed to me. Got to see what we can do in the way of finger-prints, too. Won't take long, of course, but——"

"So long for now, Jack. Brawley's waiting below."

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With which curt farewell Slade passed out, leaving the other to fling the stump of his cigarette into the blue-tiled grate and settle down again to his work.

Downstairs Slade found Brawley waiting with growing impatience. A powerful, long-bodied car was drawn up, with engine running. Besides Brawley, who stood on the pavement, two other members of the Flying Squad were seated inside.

Brawley climbed into the driving-seat, and Slade got in beside him. The uniformed constable on duty touched his helmet as the car slid out through the large iron gates into the glare of Whitehall. As they rounded the corner Slade caught sight of a man lounging under a lamp-post. Brawley turned sharply, and Slade saw the man under the lamp raise his head above his tucked-up collar. In the wan light of the lamp Slade had a momentary glimpse of the man's face.

It was the other man he had seen in the room at Rocks Dallow! The man who had had little to say!

Slade leaned to one side and whispered something in Brawley's ear.

By the Horse Guards the car drew into the kerb, and Slade and one of the men seated behind got out. In an instant they were threading their way back through the throng of passers-by. Slade caught a glimpse of his man as the latter darted across the road in front of a starting omnibus; the detective gave the harassed driver further exercise for a remarkable vocabulary. They trailed the man to a telephone-booth in the Westminster Underground station. While Slade stood back against a closed fruiterer's stall, his companion entered the next booth and closed the door. Slade saw him take out a notebook and pencil.

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When the man came out some one jostled him with scant apology, and something cold clicked round his wrist. Before he knew what had taken place he was told to come along quietly.

Outside on the pavement they met Brawley, who had followed them.

Another five minutes were spent in conveying their charge to the Yard, and then once more they set off.

As the car turned into Baker Street Brawley leaned toward Slade, who was at the moment occupied with his thoughts and an appetizing sandwich, and remarked:

“Hammond thinks he got the number all right—although we can soon verify it. And the message—most of it.”

Slade nodded. His mouth was full.

When he had cleared it:

“What was the number?”

Brawley took one hand off the wheel.

“Says he’s sure it was”—he unfolded a piece of paper and squinted at it as they passed a street-lamp—“here it is—‘Sudley three four one nought.’ Make anything of it?”

Slade was staring fixedly at the reflection of the headlights on the smooth asphalt. For a moment he imagined himself back in that room with the open telephone directory before him on the sideboard, and in his nostrils the sweet scent of lilac.

The car gave a jolt, and he raised the half-consumed sandwich to his mouth.

“I fancy that’s the number of a place we’ll have something to do with presently—the Élite Garage.”

CHAPTER X: *The Curtain Rises*

SIR ROYSTON met them where he had appointed, and readily volunteered his services. He told Slade that Dr Bruce had called to see him after the inquest, and that they had had a chat together. Collins, he said, had reserved his evidence, and after Thorne had been called upon to identify the body as being that of Sir Giles, and himself to answer one or two questions, and after the servants had all stood up and sat down again, the case had been adjourned. A slight tremor of sensational interest had passed through the court when Collins had dramatically announced his intention of withholding evidence, but that had been all.

Eventually the car pulled up at a by-road which, as the baronet informed them, was the one which crossed the open expanse of common, bearing away to the left for some five miles or so, and dipping down into a place called Bent Gully, from which it climbed to the main road below Polbridge. The baronet's car was parked behind the police tender.

Slade and Brawley proved not far out in their timing. Twenty minutes or so after their meeting with the baronet one of the men heard a motor-cycle chugging toward them in the distance. He reported to Brawley. A couple of seconds later a speck of light was discerned moving rapidly along the downward stretch of road in their direction.

It was one of Brawley's links between the Flying

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Squad patrols. Brawley was leaving little to chance this time. The cyclist brought the news that a large yellow car had pulled up at a garage this side of the town, below the station rise.

Brawley saw Slade smile as the man gave his news.

"What is it, Tony?" he asked.

"That garage happens to be the Élite."

Brawley nodded significantly, and again turned to the cyclist.

A few explicit instructions, and the man remounted, and turned his machine toward the road across the common. There was no moon, and scarcely a breath of wind. Somewhere out over the common a night-bird cawed shrilly. One of the detectives was employed in rolling a cigarette by the rear light of the police car. The headlights had been switched off.

Then Gillespie started up his engine, and he and Slade clambered into the car and followed the cyclist into the night, leaving Brawley and his men to wait until the yellow car had passed—if it should. Providing that nothing had gone amiss, another police patrol should be trailing the gang from the town. Beyond Polbridge yet another patrol was in readiness.

The arrangements seemed to preclude any possibility of the gang breaking through, and at the same time placed the Squads so they could co-operate at short notice in a massed raid on the farm.

As they glided across the dark expanse of open heath Slade explained to the baronet as much as he thought was advisable. Gillespie seemed to be giving the whole of his attention to the driving, peering ahead with half-shut eyes.

The air struck chill on their faces as they bounded along the uneven track, scored on Slade's map as

second-class, and once the baronet had to swerve sharply to avoid a large branch which, snapped close to the trunk, hung low over the road to a dangerous level. As it was, Gillespie's hat was torn from his head and whisked away. The car bumped as he again brought it square on the track.

Several times Slade looked back to see if he could see anything of the gang's car, and as they approached the incline which led down to the dangerous Bent Gully, and the baronet jammed his brakes down hard, the detective thought he saw a swiftly moving light skimming the surface of the road, perhaps a mile behind them. Then he missed it.

The car was brought up against a bank, and they waited, watching for the reappearance of the light.

Gillespie saw it first, under half a mile away. Straining their ears, they fancied they heard the steady droning of the engine.

As the going was downhill, Gillespie again switched on the headlights, and the car bounced unsteadily. A dangerous curve was rounded in safety, without slackening speed, and then the throttle was opened, and, with lights once more switched off, they took the last lap at something like forty.

When they brought up on the road Gillespie, by prearranged plan, changed seats with Slade, who now took the wheel.

After a couple of furlongs of furtive crawling the detective asked his companion how far he reckoned they were from Polbridge. Sir Royston said he thought they were anywhere between two and two and a half miles.

Slade slackened down still more. He was getting a little anxious. Those behind could not be far off,

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in spite of slow going down the incline, and so far he had seen no sign of Brawley's scout.

Then, borne on the soft stillness of the night, he caught a low hail. It came from somewhere among a group of stark-looking trees, black, filmy shapes in the darkness. There was a small, shallow ditch skirting the road, half filled with water from the recent rains. The baronet's car, under Slade's careful hand, slithered in and squelched out. It bumped on peaty soil, and crawled forward as though on a carpet of indiarubber. Within a few feet of the trees Slade pulled up.

Brawley's scout loomed up before them.

"Look!" he whispered, pointing in the direction of the road.

They could not see the car or hear it, but they saw its green-shaded headlamps. It was doing little more than moving—toward Polbridge—some distance down the road.

"There's a couple in her. I passed 'em and repassed 'em," went on the Flying Squad man. "But our fellows are on the wheeze, and they're sneaking up—with silencers on too."

Slowly the car crept up the road, its shaded lights for all the world like two monstrous cat's eyes, and Slade watched its progress with a queer kind of sensation in his throat, like tickling, only hotter.

The overture was ended. This was the raising of the curtain on the first act.

Then, simultaneously, all three spun round. Down the road, from the opposite direction, came the sound of a speeding car. A moment, and then they saw it. It slipped through the night like a phantom; passed them.

The other car had drawn to a standstill. The three

men under the trees watched the second car draw level. Some one called hoarsely to its driver.

Before the reply came there was a loud report from farther down the road, followed a moment later by another. A medley of raucous, shouting voices rose from the direction of the two motionless cars.

The Flying Squad man turned and faced Slade with clenched fists.

"It's a trick! That was Brawley's car! It's got a puncture! Two! The slippery skunks! They've tricked——!"

"They've turned!"

Gillespie was pointing excitedly.

The car with the green-shaded headlamps had soon been brought round, and now both cars were slipping down the road with engines roaring.

Slade caught Gillespie by the arm.

"Is there another way of getting on to the road from up there?" he asked sharply, pointing to where the reports had come from.

Gillespie shook his head.

"Only across these fields," he said. "And you can see for yourself they're little better than a bog."

Slade turned to Brawley's man.

"You'll have to tell 'em—and quick. They've probably held up the second patrol, which is lucky. But they're wasting valuable time. Get 'em across here and on the road again. Once Brawley's across, he can borrow Sir Royston's car."

There was no question of asking permission. Politeness is one of the cheap luxuries of those whose daily routine does not include a break-neck race with a gang of desperate crooks who have thrown their first hazard—and won.

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The man stepped up to his machine without a word, when Slade caught him by the shoulder.

"You'll have to leg it," he said quietly. "I'm going to borrow your machine. Sir Royston'll stop here with his car. Perhaps he'll get it on to the road in readiness?"

He addressed the query half to the baronet.

"Sure!" Gillespie set the action to the words by straightway starting up the engine.

Slade dragged the motor-cycle past the car.

"You're sure that patrol's all right?" he inquired a little fretfully of the man, who was busy unstrapping his goggles.

As he finished speaking from down the road came a couple of *staccato* reports, one immediately after the other. There followed a ragged volley of small-arm firing.

"That settles it!" grunted Slade, as he heaved the mud-stuck machine out on the road. Without waiting for the goggles, he was astride and off. The Flying Squad man called out something to him, but he didn't catch the words. For the moment the noise of his engine drowned every other sound in the universe.

Then he heard the sound of firing repeated, and wondered how things were shaping with the patrol. Feeling with one hand, he hitched the skirts of his coat round him until the pocket containing his automatic was over his right knee.

He took the outside of a sudden bend in the road, churned through a deep muddy rut, and literally flung the machine back to the other side of the road again. He wiped the mud from his face with the back of a hand. Two hundred yards in front of him glimmered a red speck. His rear wheel rose danger-

ously, and he had to sit hard and grip the handle-bars for dear life. Yard by yard, he ate up the distance between him and that red speck. When a bare fifty yards remained he drew out his automatic.

All of a sudden the red light vanished.

The car had turned aside at a branch road. As Slade swerved round the corner another crackling tore the silence of the night ahead. He set his teeth and pressed his knees tighter.

He reserved his fire until his machine drew level with the police patrol. And then he opened up.

Two red dots ahead showed where the gang were racing, heading off, it seemed to Slade, in a circle. And the pace increased. Shots rang through the night, spattering against the hard road, and tearing up little clouds of dust in front of the headlamps. Once a shot hit the body of the police car, and one of the men inside swore savagely. Slade worked his machine slowly in front, nosing his way forward inch by inch. And all the time they were bearing back. Slade was puzzled.

He remembered crossing a flimsy affair of a bridge some few yards in front of the police car, and he realized that he had fired his last shot—his magazine was empty—and that one of the Flying Squad men had just recommenced pot-shooting, when all at once a sharp, startled cry rang out ahead. It was a thin, trailing cry—of fear.

There was a dull grinding sound, a howl of terror, a crash, and in a trice one of the red lights was blotted out.

The firing ceased. Something had happened.

The remaining red light disappeared as the pursuers paused.

Slade dismounted at the same time as the Flying

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Squad members got out of their tender. They hurried forward together, the same question on their lips.

The car that had crashed was lying over on its side, its nose into the hedge, one wheel having been ripped clean off at the impact. A wide stream of petrol was trickling from the bruised engine and collecting in a dark pool in the road. Slade clambered over the twisted frame and unlatched a door. One of the men switched on a flash-lamp. The wind-screen was smashed to smithereens.

Inside, tumbled together amid the fragments of broken glass, lay the two bodies, still.

Carefully, and as gently as was possible in the circumstances, the police removed first one body and then the other from the *débris*. It was a gruesome task. It meant raising the car body, which took time. One of the bodies was pinned underneath. The man was living when they got him out. The other was dead. He had struck his head.

They hunted for a bullet-mark, but couldn't find any sign of one. Meanwhile the dead man was placed in the police tender, and the other had as much rough first-aid administered as they could render.

In a short while Brawley and his men arrived on the scene with Gillespie. In Gillespie's car was a complete first-aid outfit. The baronet did what he could to relieve the man's sufferings, but he lay there groaning pitifully. Gillespie said the trouble was in the abdomen. The man's body above the hips was raw, and when they raised him to lay him in the baronet's car one leg slipped from their hold and dangled at a grotesque angle. It was broken just above the knee.

A hasty consultation was held as to the next move.

Brawley explained that the gang had strewn the road with broken bottle-glass, with disastrous results to the police tender's front tyres.

However, Slade was not for dwelling on what hadn't been avoided, and now couldn't be helped, but for pushing forward. Gillespie volunteered to drive the wounded man in his car, while the two police cars pushed forward. He would follow at a more leisurely pace.

The next question was what direction had the gang taken, and Slade's map was studied closely. It proved of little use, however. Then Gillespie had an inspiration. He reminded Slade of where he had waited for the detective on the previous night. If he remembered rightly, that track across the common which opened out into the road leading by the farm was itself a continuation of another branch road about three-quarters of a mile farther on from where they were.

Brawley and his men didn't follow the direction clearly, but Slade did. As he had thought, they had been travelling in a narrowing circle, or, more correctly, a helix. As soon as the arrangement was decided Brawley detailed one of his men to accompany the baronet, while Slade remounted the motor-cycle preparatory to leading the way. It had been agreed that as soon as Gillespie struck the road on the other side of the common he should drive on into the town and make for the Cottage Hospital, where he was to await Slade.

The men returned to the task of pursuit with less relish after what had taken place, but Slade and Brawley were, if anything, more determined than ever to come to grips with the rest of the gang.

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The fact that they had been cleverly duped, outwitted, and the gang's sheer callousness in driving on after the accident, acted as a stimulus to the work on hand. And with them they bore the body of the luckless man.

Slade found the branch road after many misgivings, and turned his machine back across the heath, with Brawley and the others not many yards behind. No precaution was taken now. The affair had resolved into a question of time. Slade made the most of it.

When the common was left behind, and the steady climb toward the farm begun, Slade dropped back and let Brawley's car forge ahead. The other police car brought up the rear.

No light shone from any of the windows of the isolated farm when they pulled up on the stretch of road that ran winding past. Jallopp's Farm appeared as lonely and deserted as it was believed to be—and as indeed it might be, for all any of them knew to the contrary—and for a space Slade doubted his own deduction. But remembrance of the woman's words on the 'phone, and those of Mick later, gave him confidence. Besides, Gillespie had said those lights couldn't have come from anywhere else. There wasn't anywhere else they could have come from. He buttoned his coat collar tighter. It was the hour when the dew is dampest, and there was a nip in the air. A little wind had sprung up, and could be heard moaning dismally across the wide heath.

Brawley gave his men their last instructions. Then he and Slade climbed over the rickety old sun-blistered gate, and, automatics ready, cautiously led the way.

The ramshackle outhouses and buildings were

deserted, and there was no sign of any recent disturbance. All was silent, save for the hooting of some disturbed owl. In the distance could be heard the faint trickle of the creek. The men spread out fan-fashion, and without a word being spoken the approach to the farmhouse itself was made. It was almost reached when one of the men discovered an old petrol-tin in a clump of syringa.

Then Slade discovered fresh-made car-tracks.

Entrance was made through the kitchen, and Slade, flashing his electric lamp into odd nooks and corners, made his way into what at one time must have been the family dining-parlour, followed by Brawley and two of his men. On the high, wide mantelshelf was an oil-lamp. Slade smelt it before he saw it. He touched it, and quickly withdrew his hand.

The glass globe was hot !

When Brawley had lit the lamp Slade cast his eye round the square, low-ceilinged room. He bent down and rubbed his fingers over the chair-arms and over the table-legs, then over the old-fashioned dresser-cupboard. But nowhere save in the farthest corners was there any trace of accumulated dust. In the large grate was a heap of cold embers, covered with a grey flaky ash which crumbled on being touched.

That fire might have been out a year—perhaps ten years.

Slade turned to Brawley.

“What do you think?” he asked solemnly.

“A blank,” replied the other. Brawley did not choose at the moment to mince his words. He was not in the mood. He was feeling his disappointment keenly, although he did his best not to show it.

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The drawers of the table and the cupboards and the sideboards of the room revealed nothing of interest to the searchers. Nor did those of any of the rooms on the ground floor. There was an upstairs floor and an attic, which completed the building.

They had finished their search on the lower floor, and had returned to the dining-parlour, when one of Brawley's men who had gone exploring upstairs returned with an envelope in his hand. He handed it to Slade, with word that he had found it lying on the table in the room immediately above.

The latter took it and frowned at the inscription. It was sealed and addressed to "Mr Slade, of Scotland Yard, when that gentleman chances to call." He knew the untidy, angular scrawl. He had seen it before, in the note addressed to Sir Giles Gillespie.

Slade ripped open the envelope and read:

I am extremely sorry, Mr Slade, that I could not stop to see what happened, but you must blame yourself for that. Something serious, I presume. Anyhow, you may rest assured that I shall know what to do in the case of an emergency. For the rest, you have had a long run for your money. Remember, I said you would come back, didn't I? You would do well to remember something else I said. So you arrested Dickson. It was hardly wise, was it?

Brawley, reading the note over Slade's shoulder ground his teeth sullenly.

"Devil!" he muttered thickly.

Slade creased the note with his thumb-nail.

"Hardly," he said flippantly. "Although on the face of it, I grant you, Abe, your supposition is reasonable enough."

His tone was light, but his shadowed eyes glinted with a steely light.

"And Dickson?" queried Brawley.

"The man we arrested at Westminster. He must have been watched by some one else, who reported. Hence the broken glass—and this."

"And to think that she herself was in that car!" Brawley sounded sore.

He set two of his men to search the rooms upstairs, and then came back to Slade, who had lit his pipe and was intently examining some deep irregular impressions on the table surface.

"Come here," beckoned the detective as Brawley approached. "What d'you make of these?"

Brawley leaned over Slade's arm and looked through the small pocket-lens in the detective's hand.

"They're new," he said. "Look, the splinters are clean."

Slade stood back.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, "they're new—certainly. But how do you think they were made?"

Brawley looked closer. At last he stood up.

"I don't know. A screw—perhaps——"

"Exactly—a screw. Yes!" Slade's voice seemed to come from far away. "A screw . . . Now look under the table."

Brawley placed the lamp on the floor and got down on his knees. Slade came forward.

"A screw—on top and underneath. What does that suggest to you?"

Brawley looked at him keenly, but did not answer. Slade went on didactically:

"And those scratches on the side. What d'you make of them?"

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Brawley looked down again.

"Something was fixed," he said, "—screwed—flush with the side—tight——"

"Wouldn't you say it was a vice?"

"Ah!"

Brawley's hooked nose rose in the air. He got to his feet and turned to meet the men who entered the room. One held a small rat-tailed file in his hand. That and a pile of old, stained pieces of wash-leather were all they had found.

Slade took the file and examined it under the lamp. Wedged in between its blunted teeth were some minute light-coloured filings. Carefully he tapped some into the palm of his hand and looked at them through his lens. Then he slipped them into an envelope, sealed it securely, and placed it in a waistcoat-pocket.

For a moment he stood undecided. Then he got down on his knees by the table. There was a large, gaping crack in the discoloured linoleum which covered the floor. He slit the linoleum across with a pocket-knife, and pulled it back. Brawley shifted the lamp to his side. Softly Slade blew on the stained, fluff-strewn boards. A cloud of choking dust rose, and he had to shield his eyes. Before the dust settled again he smoothed his finger-tips over the floor-boards. One of Brawley's men handed him a small metal box from his attaché-case. From this he extracted a moist pad, which he very carefully placed on the boards at different angles and in different places. Then he held the pad up to the light. It was caked with dirt. This he scraped off with his knife. Once more he blew softly across the boards, and again applied the pad in a similar manner. This time when he held the pad up to the

light there were a dozen or so sharp, flinty scraps of metal adhering to it.

Slade scraped them off and placed them in another envelope, which he marked No. 2.

Then he got to his feet, and the linoleum was replaced over the boards.

For a moment there was silence.

All of a sudden Slade, who had been standing with his back to the fireplace, hands behind his back, squared his shoulders.

"Listen!" he cried. "Where is it?"

The other detectives looked at him blankly. Brawley raised his eyes, questioning.

"Where is what, Tony?"

"The clock—where is it?"

They all looked round the compartment. There was no clock to be seen, but now that Slade had brought it to their notice each heard the faint ticking of one, a ticking which sounded as though the clock was muffled. There was no need to search in the sideboards and cupboard. If any clock had been in one of those places it would have been discovered at the first search. As it was, they were at a loss to explain the queer yet distinct ticking which seemed to proceed from nowhere in particular. Undoubtedly it was the ticking of a clock. They looked at one another questioningly. The sound was heard most distinctly when they stood where Slade had been standing, by the fireplace. Brawley remarked that it seemed to come from somewhere at the back of the mantelshelf.

Slade's face grew thoughtful. A sudden fearful idea came to his mind. He remembered the woman's letter in his pocket—and remembered her warning.

"Quick!" he called to the others, in a voice

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slightly husky and strained. "We've got to find it! Here, Abe, take that side—there, like this!"

As he spoke his fingers were passing over the wall at the side of the large mantelshelf. Wondering, Brawley stepped to the other side. The wall, however, proved to be solid enough. Slade, unsatisfied, climbed on a chair and rapidly passed his fingers over the top of the large square of glass. There was little dust on the ledge above, and as he leaned forward he experienced an odd, unaccountable thrill. His fingers touched a smooth small knob in the brickwork.

He stretched up on his toes and pressed.

"Look out!" he called suddenly.

Slowly the heavy overmantel was turning on a hidden pivot. It swung back jerkily into the room, revealing a deep recess.

Some one raised the lamp.

On a shelf in the recess was a large black box, studded with brass screw-heads and bound securely with a stout leather strap. Set in one side of the box was a small dial, the glass sunk level with the woodwork. Slade did not hear the ticking any longer, although the clock was before his eyes. He was staring with fascinated eyes at the dial-face. There were three hands.

The two large ones were almost on the same division!

And the seconds were ticking by. For an instant Slade felt giddy and cramped, a strange humming filled his ears, and he was aware that warm drops of perspiration were breaking out on his forehead and collecting over his throbbing temples.

His eyes flickered, and in that half-instant he saw a piece of paper, folded, lying farther back on the

shelf. He snatched at it, got his fingers on it, then jumped from the chair, and wheeled round, his legs strangely limp and his face pallid.

The chair fell toppling.

“For your lives—quick!”

As they flung themselves into the darkness outside there was a dull roaring sound, a cracking, then a splitting of bricks and stone.

“My God!” breathed Slade hoarsely, his face streaming, as he tottered to a halt.

The others, speechless, faced about.

One half of the farmhouse, that which contained the dining-parlour and the staircase, seemed lifted bodily in the air. A flash of flame—darkness—and the sound of hurtling masonry.

“My God!” echoed Brawley.

CHAPTER XI: *Paula Dane Disappears*

FOUR grave and thoughtful men were seated in Inspector Collins' office at half-past ten the following typical October morning—not unpleasant in the sun, rather chilly in the shade, clouds and leaves. They were Divisional Inspector Collins himself, Sir George Simpson-Harding, Chief Constable of the county, Detective Inspector Brawley of the Flying Squad, and Detective Inspector Slade of the Criminal Investigation Department.

When Inspector Collins leaned across his desk and picked up the telephone-receiver with much the air of a dictator about to sign his abdication, a short silence fell. The previous few minutes had been rather heated. Collins got through to his number immediately, and asked for Dr Marriott. If Dr Marriott wasn't there, would they kindly ask the house surgeon to speak? It was Inspector Collins speaking. However, Dr Marriott was there, but he was very sorry, when he came to the 'phone, that he could give Inspector Collins no further news of the patient. After the operation which had followed instantly upon examination the patient had been given a sleeping-draught. He was not expected to come round before another four hours or so at the earliest. Of course, if there was anything they could do meantime that would . . .

Collins snorted brusquely that there was a great deal they could do in a great many ways, and

promptly rang off. He turned to the three men, two with their notebooks open before them.

"There's nothing to be learnt from that quarter yet, gentlemen. In a little while perhaps——"

He hesitated, looking at Sir George Simpson-Harding as to a prompter.

The Chief Constable, pale, ascetic-looking of face, turned his watery, lustreless eyes to follow a few high-blown leaves which skimmed across the wide window-pane.

"In a little while, perhaps. But in the meanwhile we mustn't pause. Investigation must proceed, Collins, along definite lines. This is a case for speedy action, not for speculation; but at the same time nothing must be premature. The data supplied us by Scotland Yard is deplorably meagre. We have no finger-prints of this Lionel Gillespie. That's a pity. The description we have of the man is quite inadequate and several years out of date. We've little to go upon except that he is believed to be in England and that suspicion centres on this quarter. Headquarters suspicion, that is."

He looked from Slade to Brawley, and there was little sympathy in his glance.

Collins interposed with due professional gravity.

"There is the case of Sir Giles Gillespie's death, Sir George. That has still to be cleared up. Doubtless headquarters have an eye to that case as well. Perhaps they find a connecting-link."

The Chief Constable's pale brows knitted.

"Doubtless!"—with a wealth of insinuation.

The two detectives retained a tacit silence. Comment was out of the question.

Collins took the chance presented.

"And with that in view our later investigations

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have proceeded over a wider field than would have been thought necessary, or even advisable, at first consideration. Every precaution, I may say, has been duly taken. Possibilities have been weighed, Sir George. Likely evidence sifted. Perhaps I may add now that but a few hours ago a new, strange piece of information was brought to my notice. It has a decided bearing on the case."

He paused dramatically, relishing the consternation he believed his words to have raised.

"I've been informed that on the day before his death Sir Giles Gillespie entered a theatrical costumier's establishment in Stanley Street and bought a light brown moustache. His visit to the shop was remembered because he was particularly anxious to procure a certain shade of brown. He examined those shown him by electric light and ordinary daylight. The assistant who served him recognized him from photographs which have appeared from time to time in the *Sudley Observer*."

Not a trace of feeling was revealed in Slade's face as he glanced up from pencilling something in his notebook. As for Brawley, he was scarcely interested. His interest in Sir Giles Gillespie's murder waxed only when mentioned in relation to the gang he was bent on running to earth. As far as he or any of the others could see, there was no connexion between the two cases. Chance had drawn Anthony Slade into the fight against the gang, and he himself . . . If the truth were told he didn't quite understand where he stood in relation to Slade. He couldn't see any reason for supposing it, but the last few hours had certainly made him wonder whether Slade had taken up the lead in both cases.

When he glanced up so intently at Collins his

thoughts were centred on something far different from what the Inspector had been talking about.

The Chief Constable, however, was in one of his changing moods. He turned his eyes on Collins.

"Very good, Collins—very good. But to the point, man. This car last night—what have you had done? Don't you realize that this'll be in all the papers? Reporters won't let this rest. They'll be harrying our lives out of us. Whole-page headlines—'Mystery Munitions in Lonely Farm,' and all that. We must get ahead of them, or we shan't be able to face the storm. Eh, Collins, what has been done, man?"

Sir George Simpson-Harding was irritated—and he showed it. He fidgeted in his seat and puffed and grew fretful.

There was something of the "Poor devil!" look in Slade's keen eyes when he looked toward the Inspector. Collins was thoroughly abashed. He had been unprepared for such a quenching of his new bombshell. Still, it took a good number of pin-pricks to show any decrease in Collins' store of official dignity.

"Upon receipt of information, Sir George"—he rose finely to the occasion—"a breakdown gang was despatched, and I may report that the car has been brought to the station-yard here. Further to that, a divisional order has been circulated, although"—he glanced archly at Slade and his silent companion—"if we'd been supplied with a number we should be entertaining more hope. However——"

Slade interposed with a crushing:

"Ninety seconds at the outside to adjust a reversible number-plate."

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Before Collins found his breath Brawley had something to say.

"What about the men on beat at that end of the town? Haven't they anything to report? The gang must have been doing a pretty mileage."

Collins had the advantage of knowing the countryside.

"We've no assurance that the car you mention, Mr Brawley, ever touched the town after making its escape from your patrols. In fact, I'm rather of the opinion that they avoided the town. To my mind, it would have been safer."

Slade shook his head, while Brawley chewed his tongue.

"I don't agree with you there, Mr Collins. They would have had a better chance of disappearing in the town than in the outlying country. At least, for the present."

"Even if they had another place close at hand?" queried the Chief Constable coolly. "Another place like Jallop's Farm?"

But Slade was not to be floundered so easily.

"We have no evidence that the gang has such another base. Have we, Mr Collins?"

It was a direct challenge.

"No—I—er—I can't say that we have," blustered the Inspector. He snatched at a flimsy ray of hope. "But neither have we any evidence of another rendezvous here in the town. Have we, Mr Slade?"

Slade almost laughed outright.

"No, Mr Collins, we——"

He was on the point of adding "haven't" when he checked himself. What was that Mick had said about a No. 11? What had he meant?

Collins and his superior stared as the detective paused.

The Chief Constable straightened his back.

"Something has crossed your mind, Mr—er—Slade. You have recalled something, have you not?"

Slade suddenly found himself staring into two moist eyes that seemed to be looking through him and beyond. There was a suggestion of strength about the Chief Constable as he sat there regarding the detective with his dull eyes. He had an air that might have proved disquieting to a less experienced officer. But for Slade it merely meant that he recovered an instant sooner. He realized that he was seeing yet another facet of this strange man. It was not for incompetence that Sir George Simpson-Harding had been promoted to the position he held. A natural inclination to appear superficially irritable, the outcome of an abnormally active brain, and the few eccentricities of manner which stamped the æsthete and scholar, well served the Chief Constable's purpose of hiding his true feelings.

"Yes, Sir George, I have recalled something. There is a garage—the Élite Garage it is called—on the London road which might provide us with some interesting information."

Collins sniffed audibly.

"The garage, Mr Slade, where, as I informed you, Sir Royston Gillespie purchased a packet of cigarettes on the night of his father's murder."

The Chief Constable ignored the Inspector's interpolation.

"Was that all, Mr Slade?" he inquired.

Slade fought back a smile. He had caught Brawley's twinkling eye. For the life of him he dared not look at the snubbed Inspector.

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"There was something else, Sir George. A possibility that occurred to me. Mr Collins tells us that the damaged car is in the station-yard. Well, the number of that car ought to be fairly easy to place. It strikes me, sir, that the police of the district should know something about the car."

The Chief Constable's eyes seemed on the verge of welling over. He turned to the dour-faced Inspector, who sat back silent and gloomy.

"You've got those numbers, Collins?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please look up that of the damaged car."

The Inspector reached down a massy volume from a shelf lined with general reference-books, turned to a certain page, compared a line with a note he had on his desk, and closed the book with a loud snap and a small cloud of dust.

"The car, according to its number-plate, was registered in Manchester," he announced shortly, as he pushed the closed volume across the top of his desk.

"Manchester—ha! You'll have that looked into at once, Collins. See if anything is known there about the car. What is your next move, Collins?"

"It depends very much, sir, on what other stations report. At the present moment the town is being run through by Drew and his men. The men on their beats, of course, have been warned, and it isn't likely if this gang are in the town that they'll get out without being spotted. Other arrangements will depend on what reports come in."

The door opened and Sergeant Bride entered.

"A Mr Trent, sir, of London, reporter to the *Daily Monitor*. He would like——"

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"Tell him I can't see him now—or for some time yet. Let him understand quite plainly."

"Very good, sir! There's also a Mr—er—Wettermack, who says he's from the Pictorial News Association. They've both been waiting now some three-quarters of an hour."

"Well, let them wait another three-quarters, if they're fools enough to have the time to spare!"

"Very good, sir!"

The Sergeant disappeared.

Collins screwed his neck up in his tight collar.

As soon as the door had closed the Chief Constable swung round in his chair and again spoke.

"Have you anything to suggest, Mr Slade? Time's wearing on, you know."

Slade smiled and pondered a moment. When he raised his face he wore a serious expression.

"Only that the man in the hospital is guarded," he said quietly.

The others stared.

There was no mistaking his meaning, but the Chief Constable repeated the word.

"Guarded!"

"Yes—protected!"

Sir George Simpson-Harding blinked several times in rapid succession.

"Ah! Very well! And you, Mr—er—Brawley?"

Brawley regarded the other man eye to eye.

"I should very much like to know, sir, how that car came to crash over on its side like that. Unless the steering-gear was faulty, I can't see what could have caused it. The road was bone dry. I'm puzzled, sir."

The Chief Constable sat back.

"What was Drew's opinion, Collins?" he asked.

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The Inspector shuffled together a few loose-lying sheets of paper on his desk, and turned them over quickly with a moist middle finger and thumb.

"Here we are," he said.

He paused to scan closely the lines on one of the sheets of paper. With his eyes still lowered:

"In Drew's opinion the driver must have swerved sharply to avoid running into the other car. Either that or else a bullet must have hit him. An examination of the steering-gear showed that at the moment of the accident it was in perfect working order."

The Chief Constable put in a question.

"Is it known which man was the driver?"

"It was impossible to say," answered Slade. "They were lying together, one, the man in hospital, pinned underneath. I imagine, judging from their positions when we removed the bodies, that the man whose leg was broken was the driver. But I shouldn't like to swear to it."

The Chief Constable shook his head.

"No bullet-wound was found on either man. The dead man died of concussion. Altogether an unfortunate, a regrettable affair!"

He shook his head again, then rose stiffly.

"I must be moving, gentlemen."

He shook hands formally with Slade and Brawley, picked up his hat and gloves, and turned toward the door.

"Mr Collins will co-operate with you in any enforced measures. Good day. Good day, Collins."

He passed out. The two detectives prepared to follow him.

Slade couldn't resist a final dig at Collins.

"We will be only too pleased to join hands with

you, Collins," he said, with exaggerated formality, "—headquarters fashion, you know!"

The Inspector's full face turned a putty colour, and he smiled a sickly sort of appreciation. His dark, beady eyes resembled two small black buttons stitched over his broad nose to take off the effect of width.

The two detectives walked back to the Sudley Hotel, debating together the several points that had been raised at the interview. Two of Brawley's men, unbeknown to Collins, had taken up their stations, one below the railway bridge, and the other farther down the London road. Furnished by Slade with fairly clear descriptions of the Ferret and Mick, it was not likely that the tried sleuths would miss an opportunity of trailing either man if they received it. Slade had previously that morning rung up Dr Bruce, and another member of the Flying Squad was in readiness at No. 9 Duggan Park Crescent should Jerry again show himself in that neighbourhood.

It was rather amusing, the placing of the two networks of police throughout the town, the one unaware of the other; but both Slade and Brawley agreed that some member of the gang ought to trip up in the meshes. The scope allowed the gang was being narrowed each hour.

The end seemed inevitable.

The two detectives had lunch together in the cosy grill-room of the hotel, and tirelessly set about rediscussing the situation from the gang's point of view. Slade was of the opinion that the woman at the head of it, finding the net closing in, would strike desperately. Blindly, he hoped.

Brawley, on the other hand, was of a mind that she would match patience with patience, waiting

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until the police, either through ignorance or impatience, should make a false move. He was for keeping his men active, with an eye to the places already under surveillance and also an eye to the wrecked farmhouse. A criminal, especially a woman, he argued, sooner or later travels back to the seat of his or her crime.

Over their coffee and pipes Slade explained his reasons for keeping a man on the look-out at Greystones. The butler there, he went on, was in some way or other leagued with the gang. Anyhow, he was intimate with them.

Thorne might prove useful, incidentally, in leading them to the gang's hiding-place. Slade also explained the gang's need for quickly shifting the 'goods' on their hands. The previous night's work had evidently upset their plans, and the 'goods' had not been passed on. Before long they would be trying again. Perhaps that night. Those 'goods' were plainly of a damaging nature.

At this point in the discussion a waiter approached with a note for Slade. It was from Sir Royston. The baronet requested Slade to come at once to Greystones. He had something important to tell the detective, and was in urgent need of his help and advice.

Slade, not without a feeling of anxiety, left his companion to finish his coffee alone, and, stopping only to don his hat and coat, made his way out of the hotel.

The baronet himself opened the door at the detective's ring. His face was set and white. Slade braced himself for ill-news.

It was not long forthcoming.

As soon as the detective was seated in the library

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Sir Royston divested himself of what was preying on his mind.

"It's Paula," he began, pacing restlessly about the room. "She's disappeared!"

"Disappeared!"

The baronet got a grip on himself.

"It's like this, Mr Slade. We got a 'phone message this morning. It was supposed to come from her old friends the Chalcotts. They live in the town. Old Vincent Chalcott's been ailing for some time, and the person who rang up—whom we thought was Lucy Chalcott—said that he'd been sinking rapidly in the night, and early this morning asked to see Paula. The doctor, so we were told, had given Vincent only a few hours longer."

Gillespie ceased his pacing and flung himself into one of the armchairs.

"She went, of course—in the car," he continued. Then stopped again.

"Well?" prompted Slade.

The young man's eyes glowed hectic bright.

"She hasn't returned! She's been kidnapped—stolen—shanghaied! The police found the car stranded in a side-street. Bilson was found gagged and lying trussed up inside."

"Bilson? The chauffeur?"

"Yes!"

Slade's brows contracted. It was plain that the baronet was beginning to lose his nerve.

"Go on, Sir Royston! You've got something else to tell me!"

"I have! Good God! I just have, man!"

The baronet rose and poured himself out a stiff glass of whisky, which he drank neat, at a gulp. His face screwed up as the hot spirit burned his throat.

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"Soon after the police brought the car and the news there was a 'phone call—for me. From a woman!"

Slade's face grew troubled. He stared fixedly at the carpet, and moistened his lips.

"You guess! You guess!" the young man hissed fiercely.

In a single movement Slade was on his feet, standing motionless before the other, his hands hanging at his sides, his gaze levelled, meeting the baronet's squarely.

"Tell me!"

The crisp tones stirred the man.

"That woman—the one you were telling me of—the head of that damned gang you're after! She said Paula was a prisoner—'hostage' was the word she used! She said it all depended on you whether Paula suffered or not! Suffered! My God, man, d'you hear what I say? What's it all mean? Suffered! What *can* she mean? She can't mean——"

He shuddered, and Slade gripped him forcibly by the shoulders and thrust him back into a chair. He sank down unresisting, choking.

"The chauffeur—how was he stopped?"

The note of command sobered the man.

"Some one stopped him on the road. He pulled up. Before he knew where he was a cloth—something smelling sweet, he said—was pushed in his face, and some one grabbed his throat. That's all he knows, until he came to and found himself bound and gagged in the car."

"H'm—chloroform!"

Once more the baronet burst out:

"Paula—what does she mean? Suffer! What——?"

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"It's a piece of bluff—a wild piece of bluff. She's getting desperate. The game's becoming harder! She hasn't many more moves to make in safety!"

Slade's eyes glinted.

"Listen, Sir Royston! This fight's gathering speed. But we've got to go steady. No doubt about that. She said it all depends on me, did she? Well, she's right! It will! Your *fiancée's* all right, Sir Royston. Don't you worry. That woman wouldn't dare to try any tricks. She's clever—desperate! But I'm sure of what I say!"

It was a sweeping statement, and a hazardous one, but Slade had not forgotten the tone of the woman's voice when he had told her that she regretted the bargain she had made. He had touched something deep in her then—a soul.

"But that letter—that letter to my father!"

The broken words struck Slade with terrific force. In an instant he saw the reason for that letter, for blackmail—Lionel Gillespie!

Then Sir Giles had known that his brother was a German spy! Had he known too that he was still alive—still wanted by the police?

Under the pressure of the moment the question was swept aside.

"There was a motive for that letter—hate!"

The detective spoke a little sharply. Sir Royston stared at him blankly, the wild light in his eyes fading.

"Hate? Of whom?"

Slade looked at him with half-shut eyes.

"Gillespies!"

A pained expression crossed the baronet's pale face.

"Paula!" he gasped huskily, his thoughts

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revolving in a circle, "—but she—she's a Gillespie—my cousin!"

The detective's fingers pressed into the other's shoulder as he bore him back. Slade brought his grim-set face close to the baronet's.

"Hear me! Paula Dane is—safe! You hear? The hate against the Gillespies that I spoke of is wiped out—paid for!"

For a moment the baronet sat rigid.

"You—you mean—my father!"

There was a new wonder in his thick tones.

"No! I mean——"

The words trembled on his lips, but were never uttered. He was interrupted by the entrance of Thorne. The butler announced smoothly that Mr Slade was requested on the 'phone.

The detective gave Thorne a quick look, and passed out of the room.

Five minutes later he returned. His face was as pallid as the baronet's. Something of his customary alertness was lacking.

Sir Royston sprang from his chair.

"What is it?"

His hot, blazing eyes in vain sought Slade's. The detective's mouth twitched with bitter irony, but no sound came. He slumped down on to the arm of one of the chairs.

"What is it? Tell me! What is it? Is it—God!—is it—Paula?"

The detective's arm was clutched in a feverish grasp.

"No—it's not Paula! It's the man in the hospital."

"What—what about—him?"

"They've found him—with a cord round his throat!"

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A moment of uncanny stillness.

"Dead?"

"Murdered!"

There was a queer, unnatural silence for a few seconds, broken only by the faint rustle of the dead October leaves outside on the "Terrace of the Hundred Knives."

Then arose a piercing shriek—the cry of a soul in torment.

"You damned fool! You blind fool! And you said she was safe! Murdered! Paula—in the hands of that woman! Oh, my God!"

CHAPTER XII: *The House in Cordwayne Terrace*

As Anthony Slade trudged across the grounds under the dark shapes of the beeches the birds were twittering the last notes of their evensong. The twilight was deepening—it was almost night. In the west, through the trellis-work of bare branches, the sky showed a deep indigo, lined here and there with purple. Somewhere above his head the detective saw for one fleeting instant the cold glimmer of a solitary star.

His hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, and his chin sunk low on his chest, one foot was placed before the other with a motion that was purely mechanical, the while he drew slowly at his pipe. He was brooding. As he raised his eyes, and changed his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other, he saw the lights of the house away to his left.

It was some time now since he had walked down the drive with Inspector Collins, but he had not been aware of the passing of the minutes. He had turned aside for a quiet stroll across the grounds after seeing the Inspector into his car, and had become engrossed in his survey of the latest developments in this extremely puzzling case.

Collins was in a panic. He was afraid of the Press, and how it would deal with him and his measures. The reporters he had turned away were still in the neighbourhood, hungry for news—and out to get it. He believed others had arrived since the morning.

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To-morrow would see the London papers crammed with a new sensation, just at the slackest time of the journalistic year. Sir George Simpson-Harding's prediction, the Inspector felt, was too true.

And now this man in the hospital . . .

The reason for the murder was only too plain. The gang had learnt of the man's removal to the Cottage Hospital, and steps had at once been taken to prevent his talking.

The incident gave the case an uglier look. Sir Giles Gillespie's murder was not attributable, Slade was convinced, to the gang. The woman, the brains and fountain-head of the gang, had been blackmailing him, or trying to. Slade had already deduced that she would be attempting such a manœuvre only because she knew Lionel Gillespie to be alive—and because Sir Giles had known him to be alive. The odds were that she had seen him. For her to have been instrumental in the murder of Sir Giles was to Slade's mind illogical; but it was not on that score that he disposed of the theory that she was concerned in the murder of the baronet. He knew of women and their ways enough to know that they live only to make a mock of the science of logic. That letter of hers may have been a clever piece of deluding. But the tone in which she had denounced the brother hadn't.

Besides which there was the staging of the murder to look like suicide. There were those letters of the baronet. Those letters! Slade felt that once he could elucidate all that they stood for he would be able to put his hands on the murderer.

This other murder, however, was different—that is, it made a difference in Slade's reckoning up of the people against whom he was pitted. If the woman

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had not been the actual originator of this new crime, the fact remained that it had been committed by the gang.

It might be argued that there was no existing proof of this. But Slade was sufficiently versed in the centripetal action of the criminal mind, and experienced enough in desperate men and their motives, not to confuse his own mind with any pernicky doubt.

Walking there beneath the trees in the slight chill of the autumn evening, reviewing the case with a dispassionate calm, it seemed to Slade that his job stood out above everything else, a fixed entity. It was not a new feeling to Slade. It was the feeling he generally got when he was about to wind things up. Shortly, he knew, must come the deciding clash. And he knew that it would be a battle of brain and brawn.

Sir Giles' murderer—and the breaking up of the gang!

That was his job, as he saw it. The first—the murderer—because he had been deputed the task. The second—the smashing of the gang—because, in spite of Brawley and the Flying Squad, the woman had challenged him.

Collins—he preferred not to take the officious Inspector into his plans. Gillespie—he felt that the baronet had lost some faith in him since the disappearance of his *fiancée*. No, more and more he was coming to see that if he was to bring the case to a head he must move alone. It seemed little short of absurd on the face of it, but Slade had trained himself to think in absurdities. He had been called a fool for trailing that little stunted devil Perorcqué on his own. Yet the finest brains in England and

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France had had to sit back and watch the unassuming English detective bring his quarry in single-handed.

He turned aside at the end of the long avenue of beeches and strolled across the lawn, sniffing the refreshing odour of the moist, cool earth. Darkness had drawn in, and all around him the night was alive with its thousand and one whispers.

When the detective returned to the library the baronet was seated writing a letter. At sight of the detective Roy Gillespie put down his pen and rested his elbows on the bureau before him.

"You're going now, Mr Slade?" he inquired in a flat voice.

"Yes, Sir Royston, I'm going now."

Slade picked up his coat, which was still on the chair where he had left it.

The baronet rose. He seemed nervous, self-conscious.

"You—you'll accept my apologies, Mr Slade, for—for what I said just before Inspector Collins came? I—I wasn't quite myself. Perhaps things—got——"

He hesitated, looking past the detective.

"—got a little beyond me. It's all so bewildering that when it comes to trying to understand I—I——"

Slade stopped him with a hand on his arm, and looked into the baronet's colourless face with grave but kindly eyes.

"I think I understand, Sir Royston, and I'm extremely sorry for you. I'll do my very utmost. We must all be patient—for a short while."

They looked past each other, half turning round. The moment was an awkward one for both. Together they stood gazing out upon the ill-omened terrace.

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For several seconds neither spoke.

Then, with his eyes still focused upon the darkness without, the baronet broke the silence.

"I'm afraid, Mr Slade, that Inspector Collins has his doubts about me still." He tried to smile, but his features were as though carved in stone, pale, inflexible. "I remember at the inquest the hard look he gave me."

"You were unfortunate, Sir Royston, in ruffling him at the outset. He hasn't straightened out his plumes yet."

The detective tried his best to joke it off, but found it not an easy matter. From the persistency of the man Slade knew that the baronet wanted to settle something that was on his mind.

"There was the affair of Paula's handkerchief which worried us so. Collins couldn't have learnt about that?"

So that was it! Slade drew a half-sigh of relief. He had feared that the baronet had been about to ask him something concerning his father, and, not unnaturally, he was feeling in no mood for talking obscurely on that topic.

"Collins knows nothing whatever about Miss Dane's handkerchief," said Slade. "I found that—quite by accident, I must admit."

"Oh!"

Slade put down the odd inflexion of the monosyllable to anxiety. The baronet was too perturbed to be sceptical.

"It was while I was examining the path down there. It started to rain, and I happened to stand up facing the lawn. I couldn't help noticing the din some crows were kicking up in that chestnut out there. For the moment I stood watching them

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fly about the tree, cawing like the dickens. I saw something white float down from the branches, and all of a sudden the din stopped. I ran across the lawn and picked up what I had seen drop. It was Miss Dane's handkerchief. How it got into the rooks' nest is pretty obvious."

Suddenly the young man wheeled round impetuously. He seized one of the detective's hands.

"You're a brick, Mr Slade!" he said fervidly. "I shan't forget—ever! Things will all come right—they must! And for me to have treated you as I did just now——"

"Forget it, Sir Royston—I have."

The baronet's mouth worked nervously.

There was a genial warmth in the detective's smile that belied the cold fear eating at his heart. He felt that he must do something. With a few additional words of encouragement he hurriedly took his leave. Sir Royston went back to the bureau to finish his letter.

The butler, Thorne, saw Slade out. As he stepped outside the detective turned. His face a blank, the butler stood waiting to close the door.

Slade rolled the brim of his soft felt hat between his fingers.

"When was it you said you were gassed, Thorne—March 'fifteen?"

"Yes—sir."

There was the faintest of pauses between the words.

"H'm—funny. I was out there much the same time. And as far as I can remember or find out there wasn't a gas-attack before April. Funny!" he repeated.

A startled, hunted look crossed the butler's face, but was gone in an instant.

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"Yes, it seems funny, as you say, sir," he asserted smoothly. "One would have expected, among all these present-day books on the War, to have found——"

"Would one?"

The butler flinched as from a blow. There was no mistaking the detective's tone—or meaning.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir," he stammered.

Slade placed a foot in the doorway, and lowered his voice.

"If you'll take my advice, Thorne, you'll cut out that gang—before it's too late!"

The butler drew himself to his full height.

"You'll excuse me, Mr Slade, but you're labouring under a misapprehension. And I think you'll agree, sir—upon reflection. If you mean the little party we get together at the Cricketers' Arms."

Slade's under lip stiffened. The man's coolness was more than a trifle disconcerting. The detective had banked on making an impression.

On a sudden impulse Slade took from his pocket-wallet a folded sheet of notepaper.

"Just put down the name of the proprietor and the address of the Cricketers' Arms, Thorne," he said, offering his pen.

Without a tremor the butler complied.

Slade thanked him shortly, and again stepped outside.

"If you'll allow me to say so, I think you are very much mistaken, sir. Most of the boys up at the Arms are ex-Service men, an' if we do 'ave a flutter now an' then——"

Slade did not hear the rest. He was down the steps and moving sharply along the drive. Of one thing he was convinced. Richard Thorne, whoever

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he was, was a clever actor. There was no doubt to be cast upon the man's story of how he came to Greystones—or his War record either, for the matter of that. Sir Royston and Dr Bruce, as far as the latter was able, had confirmed every statement. And yet that gas-attack—he was wrong. He had lied—in ignorance, Slade thought. But surely a man who had been gassed would have known . . .

Outside the grounds, some little way down the road, Slade came upon Brawley's man smoking a cigarette in the shadows.

"Here, Simms," he said, approaching the man, whom he recognized, and who recognized Slade, "if that butler comes along hang on to him for dear life. You've got your motor-bike?"

The man answered in the affirmative, and the detective went on.

"I've got an idea he's going to lead us home. If he does," he added mysteriously, "you and I will be meeting before very long. So keep a sharp look-out."

The man nodded, spoke a few words about their chances of getting the gang, and Slade strode on down the road. He was thinking of the butler. The man had been picked up by the gang as one who might be useful from his knowledge of the country round about and of the town. He was, as Slade suspected, little more than a dupe.

In the hotel lounge he came upon Brawley, who was busy scribbling down notes on a peculiar-shaped writing-pad, a leather-bound contraption of his own designing, with adjustable leaves of carbon and tracing paper. In his way, Abe Brawley was a clever and ingenious officer. Slade knew his colleague's worth—none better.

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The Flying Squad officer looked up, but said nothing as Slade sat down. After completing the paragraph he was on he pushed the pad to one side and screwed up his gold-mounted pen.

"No news?" asked Slade, laying down the evening paper he had picked up.

"Of the hospital?"

"Of anywhere—or anything, Abe."

Brawley tucked his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat and twirled his fingers.

"Of the hospital—none. Of Collins—none. Of that doctor chap—none. Of the farm—none. Of the garage—something."

"Yes?"

"It's been shut all day!"

Slade's mouth puckered.

"I rather expected it. It was just a chance—like the others. However——"

He shrugged his shoulders. Then continued in a different tone.

"You went to the hospital?"

"Yes. Got a look in, as it happened, before Collins. Whoever did the murder got in through the window. The man's bed was underneath. It was simple. Screens round the bed. No one in the ward knew anything about it until the sister came in to see how the fellow was getting on. That inspector when he got there went just about blue. Got reporters on the brain. Went off shouting about finger-prints. I'd already had a squint at the cord. A running noose—tied with gloves on. Not a trace of a clue—not one worth the bothering about. That gang's slick. They don't mean to lose a chance—and by George they don't! I'll grant 'em that, Tony."

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Brawley's large hooked nose crinkled, and his teeth showed between his lips.

Slade thought for a moment.

"What about Dickson?"

"Dickson?"

"The man at Westminster."

Brawley looked puzzled for the moment.

"What about him, Tony?"

Slade looked at him hard and knowingly.

"Is he all right? They'll get him if they can—you bet! Unless he's the kind that don't squeak."

Brawley's look was incredulous.

"What—at the Yard!"

"I wouldn't allow them any margin—after this. Seems, too, they've got agents all over the place."

The two men lapsed into a gloomy silence for several seconds. At length Slade spoke.

"Are the patrols ready—in case?"

"Sure! We're waiting for the chance!"

"It'll be the third."

"Then it'll be lucky," flashed Brawley good-humouredly. "Never too late."

"No, never too late. But it's quite late enough."

Slade rose, and with a nod passed up to his room. Several other people had drifted into the lounge, and the detectives had no desire to appear known to each other.

Once behind the door of his room, Slade set about preparing for his contemplated excursion.

In place of his felt hat he chose a cloth cap, dark in shade, which came down low over his eyes, and in place of his leather walking-shoes he chose a pair of rubber slippers with canvas tops. In his hip-pocket he slipped a small Webley. His automatic was in his overcoat pocket. As he stood before the

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glass, surveying the effect, he knotted a dark blue silk scarf round his neck, choker fashion. Then he switched off the light and cautiously made his way down the stairs, taking every care not to be seen by any of the residents.

The detective, as previously arranged, made his exit from the hotel by the staff entrance at the rear. Walking up to the top of the road, he boarded a passing tramcar. Half-way down Queen Street he alighted, and, continuing his walk, took the first turning on the right past a small Congregational church. Threading his way through the narrow network of streets in this quarter of the town, the detective after some ten minutes' sharp pacing came to the local recreation ground. From here he turned to the left, down a road wider than most he had passed. He was about to cross over to the other side when he caught sight of a familiar figure approaching.

Despite the fact that the Inspector was in civilian garb, Slade had no difficulty in recognizing him at once. Some twenty yards behind the Inspector followed Sergeant Bride and a constable.

At first the Inspector failed to recognize Slade in his new guise. But the detective did not let him remain in doubt long as to the identity of the shabby personage who had accosted him.

"Well, Inspector, I see you've been busy on something!"

If the Inspector had been looking for sarcasm he might have found it in the detective's remark. But he wasn't. He was deeply engrossed in some personal speculation.

"Why—no—yes—Mr Slade!"

Surprise thickened his tones, which were none

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too cordial. He drew back, regarding the detective with a suspicious eye, as though on guard against some practical joke.

"Something interesting, Inspector?"

Slade forced himself to sound cheerful, although Collins irritated him. He couldn't stand for long the man's colossal self-security. The Sergeant and constable, he saw out of the corner of his eye, had halted some way down the road.

"Interesting—no." The Inspector stiffened, and patted his severe-shaped bowler more securely and squarely on his bullet-head. "Merely a local inquiry that wouldn't interest you, Mr Slade—the only time I've found for it."

"Ah!" mumbled Slade, much in the manner of the type of person he was dressed to represent.

"A car—our men found it. I've just been along personally to verify. Always advisable—direct contact—if possible."

The Inspector was showing signs of being worried by something or other.

"Certainly—certainly," conceded Slade, in a mollifying tone. "But the car, my dear Collins, did it—er—signify?"

Collins laughed with sham heartiness.

"It wasn't the car you're thinking of, Mr Slade." His wide, suggestive grin grew wider. "Not the one you are—perhaps—strolling the streets on the look-out for."

From his tone, he was rather pleased at this sally.

"No?" murmured Slade blandly, refusing to be drawn.

He managed to edge himself round Collins so that his face was in the shadow of the lamp.

"No, sir—no"—with pointed emphasis. "Just

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a case of some local road-hog overstepping the traces. I'm a bit of a cyclist myself, and all cyclists have my sympathy. I contend that there ought to be a uniform speed-limit throughout the whole country. It would be safer for the general public, pedestrians and—er—motoring people alike. It would prove better—er—as a safeguard against—er—intellectual—er—and of course it would also——”

“Yes, I see your point, Inspector—I understand. I've got that fellow-feeling,” interposed Slade gently. The Inspector was growing overfull in the face. “I had a bike when I was at school. I know—yes. But surely the person who——”

“The cyclist”——coldly.

“Exactly. The cyclist who——”

“As it chances, the cyclist in this particular instance is a young lad, a Boy Scout in one of our church troops, and his word——”

“Boy Scout!”

“You find that surprising?”

Collins looked at him sharply.

“No—not at all. I was just following what you said.” Slade had recovered himself in time to steady his voice before replying. “Where did you say, Inspector, that your men—you—had discovered the car?”

“I did not say”——still more coldly. “However, at present it is in the garage at the end of this road—on the other side.” Once more his hand was raised to fix his hat. “I'm afraid”——distantly——“that I've no further time to squander, Mr Slade, and I must beg you to excuse me. There are urgent matters waiting my return. You doubtless realize. I—er—yes. Good night.”

He passed on without giving the detective an

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opportunity of saying that he did realize—whatever the Inspector wanted him to.

Slade waited until the policemen had taken up their stroll, then he crossed the road to avoid their curious scrutiny.

It was not far to the garage, a poky little place situated at the back of a steam-laundry in a place called Falcon Mews. Up a narrow court which opened out of the mews was a single-fronted public-house, without a swinging sign and without a lamp over the door. Over the drab-curtained window of the public bar the inquisitive Slade read a legend in faint gold-coloured characters—"The Falconer." Seeing in one glance all that the squalid court held of interest, the detective strolled back to the mews, and for several minutes remained lounging against a stone post. Opposite a man in shabby livery was cleaning the brass-work of a large car.

Slade ambled forward, hands in pockets, chewing a burnt match.

"No chance of a job, mate—eh?"

The man stopped his work and looked round. His unpleasant, grease-grimed face leered at Slade from under a faded purple cap with a cracked leather peak.

"Wot d'yer want?"

He spat on the stone flags of the garage and dragged his knee-pad to a rear wheel.

Slade, before answering, stepped level with him, craning his neck to see the number-plate.

"Wot d'yer want?" repeated the man testily, eyeing Slade with cold disfavour.

TS 1725.

The gang's car! The red figures on the white plate blurred themselves before Slade's staring eyes.

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The car he had hid in on the night he had met the woman in the velvet mask!

He was on the track of the gang! The Boy Scout's story! He knew it! Just a few yards—round the corner . . .

“Look 'ere, sling yer damned 'ook, yer skew-eyed mute! You an' your blasted sort ain't wanted roun' 'ere! 'Ear me?”

Slade fell back in good order before the garage attendant's threatening advance.

“I was on'y looking fer a job,” he protested brokenly.

“Well, there ain't none roun' the back o' that there car! Sling it!”

Slade halted in his retreat.

“Can't yer—I——”

“Git—aht!”

Slade turned tail without turning back.

With a little thrill of excitement he slouched out of the mews, rounded the blue-painted front of the steam-laundry, and continued for a few yards up the road to where another road crossed it. Here he stopped. A street-lamp at the other pavement corner revealed the name of the road on the wall.

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He was half-way down the road when he heard the sound of light, hasting footsteps behind him. A woman. He drew to one side as she came abreast of him. In a trice, looking neither to right nor left, she was past and hurrying on, leaving behind a faint reek of scent.

Lilac!

Slade's brain reeled.

His luck was in. He started forward, when all at once he saw the woman stop and open the gate of a

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front garden some way higher up the road. He heard the iron gate swing to on its rusty hinges.

When the detective halted before the house into which the woman had disappeared it was to hear the front door latched softly.

Cautiously, after a short interval, Slade opened and closed the front gate and stole up the flight of stone steps.

There was a brass number on the door, a few inches under the lintel. It was too dark in the porch to distinguish anything clearly. All was shadow. A passing car caused the detective to draw back, his heart in his mouth.

Then he drew his hand out of his pocket, and pressed the knob of the electric pocket-lamp gripped in his hand.

As he did so his heart missed a beat.

Slowly the front door was opening.

CHAPTER XIII: *Number Eleven*

SIX inches—a foot ! Then a pause and the sound of low voices.

That pause saved Slade.

When the Ferret set his heavy boot on the broad top step Slade was hidden behind the scrubby privet clump in the centre of the patch of scant grass which, with a heap of dry mould thrown to one side, comprised the front garden of No. 11 Cordwayne Terrace.

At last Mick's mysterious reference to "Number Eleven" was solved.

Slade heard the door closed, and saw the burly shape of the Ferret lumber down the steps and out into the street. The gate was thrown to with a bang that shook the iron railings. The detective remained crouching low behind the hedge until the sound of the man's footsteps had passed away. Quietly, a strange calm gripping him, subduing the clamorous thoughts that leapt to his mind, he crossed to the other side of the front steps, where a locked wooden door barred the narrow passage along the side of the house which led to the garden behind.

A little matter of a locked garden door was not to keep the agile Slade from his objective. The wall into which the door was set ran to the end of the front garden, about seven feet high. On the other side was the passage to the garden of the house next door. Slade climbed up by way of the front railings,

and, balancing himself with outstretched hands, lightly ran along the nine-inch thickness of the wall. A broken brick, unseen in the darkness, nearly brought him crashing to disaster, but he saved himself by falling cleverly to his hands, and groping the remaining few feet.

Once past the locked door, he dropped lightly into the passage below.

Sixty seconds later he was standing in the shadow of a tool-shed at the bottom of the weed-strewn garden, taking stock of the thin rays of light which percolated through the ribs of a venetian blind in a top-storey window.

There was no light on the ground floor, and the unlit barred windows of the basement were hidden by a projecting corner of stone coping.

Somewhere in a neighbouring garden a prowling cat opened its lungs, with a calamitous effect upon all the kennel sleepers of the district.

The whole of the front of the house was in darkness, and, save for the light glimmering from that one top-storey window, the rear was also unlit.

From close at hand a gramophone whirled a lively tune, and from a distance more remote sundry untuneful scrapings suggested that some beginner was practising chromatic scales on a cheap violin. Other noises, more distant, some fainter, some more distinct, blended with the general hum of the night. Slade, nothing if not thorough in his tactics, listened intently for a while, testing his memory as to his precise whereabouts. All around blinds were drawn. A misty moon was hidden by the house-tops. The garden was in complete darkness.

After a few moments of careful reconnoitring the

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detective climbed upon an old leaky waterbutt which stood against the garden wall at the back.

On the other side of the wall was a flickering gas-jet in a cracked, square-shaped glass lantern, which threw rings of unsteady shadows dancing up a narrow, gloomy passageway.

The whirring of the gramophone seemed suddenly nearer, louder. By peering Slade saw that the passageway, beyond the zone of thin, uncertain light, turned at a right angle. As he stood upon the waterbutt, listening and puzzling his brain, from down the unseen angle of the passageway sounded a sharp creaking, then a dull unexpected slam, as of a swing-door being let fall to. For an instant he had caught the drone of husky voices, indistinct, blurred, but distinguishable. All at once the noise of the gramophone ceased abruptly, and Slade caught the sound of clapping hands.

And then he tumbled to the truth.

The passageway on the other side of the garden wall was no other than the dingy court which opened out of the Falcon Mews, and the gramophone was the same he had heard playing in the public bar of the Falconer, the little public-house tucked away in what he had thought to be the end of the court.

As the gramophone commenced whirring forth another dizzy tune the detective climbed down from the waterbutt, and noiselessly approached the house along the garden path.

He felt easier in his mind now that he knew the surroundings of the house. In case of a slip he had somewhere to make for.

The baleful yappings of the disturbed curs of the neighbourhood had stopped. Once more he pressed

the button of his flash-lamp. By its steady gleam he tried the door of the scullery.

It opened at his touch.

Inside he switched off the torch, pocketed it, and, feeling with his hands, made his way up a couple of uncarpeted steps into what proved to be the kitchen. Not hearing a sound, he took a risk, and, his groping fingers coming in contact with the electric-light switch, he pressed it down softly.

He found himself in a small, low-ceilinged room, untidy, scantily furnished, with dust on the bare shelves and dresser. Remains of a recent meal still littered the discoloured square of American cloth which served as a covering for the plain deal table. On the floor was a stained fork. The air reeked of beer, and on the table stood two ale bottles, one unstoppered and empty, the other stoppered and about a third full.

Slade spent a few minutes in locating the steps which led down to the basement. The air from below tasted rank and musty. He came back into the kitchen after unlatching the door below which opened into the garden, and opened the door into the main passage.

Then he switched off the light.

Treading softly in his rubber slippers, and feeling along the wall with one outstretched hand, he groped his way blindly to the foot of the staircase. For a space he hesitated, staring round him in the blackness. Other rooms opened out into the hall, but the doors were closed. With every care he tried them. They were locked. He could not see a chink of light gleaming from under one.

Then he heard a voice, sharp, as though expostu-

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lating. The speaker was in an upstairs room, but Slade was too far away to catch the words. The sound of talking faded and was lost. Once more he found himself listening to his own breathing.

Slade made a rapid decision.

His right hand closed over the reassuring shape of the cold butt of his automatic, and he placed a foot upon the first stair. Testing each stair-board before trusting his whole weight to it, he reached the landing above after what seemed virtually an age. There were fifteen stairs—he counted them as he progressed—before arriving at the top, and the loudest-creaking was the ninth—the sixth, that would be, going down.

His mind was alive, and keenly sensitive to impressions of the darkness. Down his face streamed lines of moisture.

Noiselessly, without pausing to lose nerve or balance, stepping forward on tiptoe, he crept close to the door of the room from where issued the muffled sound of some one talking, explaining. Holding his breath, the detective knelt on one knee by the keyhole, and peered through.

His eye fell upon the unshaven, familiar face of Mick, who was sitting on the edge of a table nursing his dark chin. The grubby piece of stale sticking-plaster was still attached to his cheek, and his heavy features wore a new, hunted expression. When he turned his face up to the light there was a clouded look in his restless eyes, and when he spoke he spat the words with a vicious snarl.

As the detective watched him he turned about with a broad, unpleasant leer at the person who had been speaking.

“Lying low! Yes, it sounds mighty fine an’ easy.

But—tell me this—how the hell can we lie low for long? How can we?”

He flung an arm away from his face in a gesture expressive of pious contempt.

Some one—it was a man's voice—took him up.

“Why not?” It was a sullen, gruff voice. The crouching detective thought possibly Jerry's. Other than Mick he could see no one in the room. “Tell us why not. The cops ain't caught on. The boss 'as been too smart for 'em. She's made 'em sore, an' they're still smartin'. To-morrow—the next day. One day's as good as another. We'll get a chance to slip 'em—we've done it twice before. An' that's all we want. It means chucking the job 'ere, but wot of it? Can't we start somewhere else? Wot's the matter with yer, Mick? Ha' yer gorn sandy?”

Others in the room seemed of the same opinion, judging by the low chorus of gruff assents.

Mick raised his head. His eyes burned. He brushed the palm of one hand across his thin-lipped mouth.

“What chance've we got to be waitin' for to-morrow—or the day after? Fine talk—but no damned sense in it! The Flyin' Squad's on us, an' that's almighty bad enough, but that cuss Slade old Bert is nuts about is with 'em. He's the devil that's put this across us—you bet. An' 'im an' they'll be working night an' day till they've got us—ev'ry blind minute! They'll be all the keener to pull us for that jerk we gave old Mazer this afternoon. The swine!”

“Served the skunk right! 'E'd 'ave got it before if we'd a knowed about that letter, the——squealer!”

The unseen speaker's views were cordially and sympathetically received by the others in the room,

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and the occasion gave rise to a broken round of verbal cross-fire.

Slade, his neck growing stiffer with each minute that dragged by, made a mental note of that part of the room from which each voice proceeded.

From not hearing her, he concluded that the woman herself was not there. It was evident that the members of the gang assembled were incensed against the man who had been murdered in the Cottage Hospital that afternoon. Slade, breathing softly in the darkness, squinting to see as clearly as possible through the small aperture, remembered the letter Brawley had received, which had first put him on the track of the gang. The man Mazer, he gathered, must have written it. And the gang, knowing this, and learning by some means that he was in hospital, had decided that he was not to be given a chance of enlarging his breach of faith.

It was all very grim—crude too, perhaps—but Slade knew something of the cross-grained calibre of the criminal. There may be honour among thieves, but certainly none knew better than a thief how to pay a debt of honour.

When Mick spoke again he must have been answering a comment which Slade had not heard.

“You fool! 'Phone! Why, it'd be tellin' 'em to come an' fetch us—askin' 'em! You can bet your socks that they've got every wire from here to the other end of nowhere on tap. There ain't an exchange in the county but what is put up to us. 'Phone! They jest want us to—goin' crazy with the waitin'—you mole-headed mugs! It's the one chance they've got of getting us early—without a fuss. Before the Press boys start naggin'!”

Another wavering round of muttered bickering

followed upon this piece of outspoken candour. The truth, when they got it, seemed to be hitting them hard.

Then suddenly the detective noticed that the murmuring and muttering stopped. A door had opened. Slade saw Mick turn round and slip to his feet. A woman's voice was speaking, commanding.

"Where's Worthy?"

The trilling, rich tones filled the little room.

"He's gone round to the mews to see that everything's all right."

The man who spoke answered from the farther side of the room.

"Is that all?"—sharply.

A pause.

"Said he'd bring in a couple o' bottles o'——"

"Hah!"

Another awkward pause. Slade saw Mick biting at his thumb nervously. Then a man's voice which he had not heard before spoke.

"Wot about the stuff, boss? When we gonna shift it, I'm wantin' to know? 'Tain't 'ealthy, 'uggin' it this way, like we are!"

The tones were sullen and aggressive, and not altogether free from anxiety.

"We'll shift it to-night——"

"To-night!"

The word went round the room like the sighing of a small wind. Carefully Slade shifted the weight of his body on to the other leg.

"—if we get a chance—or the chance to make one. If not, then we stick to it! You hear me? Healthy or unhealthy! There's no option!"

The unseen woman's words had a crushing, dispiriting force.

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"Why not bury it—dig it in? They can't prove nothin'!"

The vehemence of the speaker served only to enhance the seeming hopelessness of the cornered gang's position.

"Why not?" The woman's soft tones mocked him. Slade, seeing nothing in the darkness of the landing save the narrow patch of light through the keyhole, framing the hunched figure of Mick, felt the gall in the words. "Suppose they bungle the Manchester affair"—she must have been referring to the police—"suppose it blows over—suppose we dig the stuff in now, and the kit too—and suppose they bungle *that*. What then?"

Slade thrilled with a new attention. There was something different—some fresh change—in the woman's voice. Something more than a mere inflection. She was no longer mocking.

"What?"

She had paused, waiting for the query. Out flashed her scorn.

"Will they bungle a—*murder*? Eh—you fools!"

The words were few, but the storm of passion raised made them tremble in her throat.

Slade gripped himself; his heart was leaping wildly. The mocking, it had gone—all of it. She was condemning—and she would be merciless.

He saw Mick turn away, one hand clawing at the table edge. The man's fish-like eyes blinked in the glare of the light, and as he stepped back the shadow of his head fell across the door, darkening the detective's view.

Strangely enough, as it seemed to the detective, they were the full, throaty tones of Mick that took up the defensive. He again gripped the table and

flung up his stubby face to the light. From the man's stance the detective gathered that both the woman herself and the room from which she had entered were to the left of the door against which he was huddled.

"It's no good going back over that—it's done with! The treacherous swine deserved what he got! The damned nark, he'd have landed us all high an' dry! All of us! Yes, us—an' you!"

His massive jawl protruded until it gave his hard-lined features the appearance of a permanent disfigurement. The dark flesh below the close-cropped back of his head swelled over the white scarf about his throat.

"Yus," some one whined from the other side of the room, "she ought ter be grateful. If it 'adn't a been fer us she——"

"Wouldn't have been here—in this hole," cut in the woman's acid tones.

Mick's chin shot out. His face looked ugly.

"What about that bomb? If that'd come off, would it have been any different from this? Bah!" He passed his thick fingers over his moist mouth. "Murder—killing—it's all the same—the perishin' same! You took your chance! We took ours! We ain't funkin'!"

The accusation was transparent.

"Funk!" The woman's voice was liquid-smooth—she might have been amused. "You haven't got the guts—none of you. The stomach to fight down funk—and win with wits. That Slade, he was warned. He took his chance with his eyes open. If that bomb had done what it was meant to—we'd have been clear by now. It didn't—so we've got to lie low. Meanwhile Slade and the Flying Squad are waiting to make the next move. To give them a

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start—you leave a corpse behind! Your funk's gone to your heads!"

"Mazer'd 'ave told 'em all ter save 'is own blotchy skin. We ain't fergot that letter!"

"No," came the lightning-like retort, "—that's what's the trouble with you! You haven't remembered anything else! Did Mazer know anything about the arrangements here?"

"The garage——"

"We've quitted that!"

"The farm——"

"That too!"

Again there was a short pause. Then the woman went on.

"Mazer and any others of the Manchester crowd knew no more about our plans here than the police themselves already know. He couldn't have told them anything for certain. On the other hand, in order to clear himself, he might by lying have given us a chance. He'd have told all about the Manchester affair, and that would have led them off the track. We'd have got clear—the chances were ten to one in our favour. But now they'll be sticking close till they get a glimpse of us and another chance of closing in. We're in the town and now they know it for sure, and, apart from the bit they learnt from the letter, they've now got the one motive they really wanted for getting us—murder! They'd have been puzzled to have proved anything about the farm. But this, they've only got to reckon on funk—and get the rope ready!"

Mick's face grew haggard. His eyes narrowed to two small slits, shadowed by his jutting brows. He tried a vain show of bluster to counteract the effect of the woman's words.

"Huh! You're clever, boss, an' can spin words fine. All women can. They get it from their mothers. But you can't spin a net o' words round us. We ain't so fresh. We can face facts. We know we've only got to——"

"Decide who's going to swing!"

Mick swore regardless of his listeners, and brought his clenched knuckles with a crashing thud on the table. Something was jerked to the floor. The hunted expression again flashed in his eyes. His burly shape seemed to sag.

"Wot we gonna do, boss? Tell us that!"

"Yes—that's what we want-a know!"

Mick had lost his hold.

During the tense silence that followed Slade got to his feet and stretched his cramped muscles. For the first time he became aware of a slight draught across the landing. It came, as near as he could tell in the pitch darkness, from a direction farther along the landing, toward the front of the house. Probably a door was at the end of the landing, and the draught came from under it. Which would mean that the window was open. Twice he silently paced a few yards to each side of the door of the room in which the gang were, and back again, in order to regain his circulation. Underneath his left shoulder was a dull throbbing. He had taken one or two deep breaths when his cocked ears again caught the sound of some one speaking.

As he thought—it was the woman.

Across the room floated a grey cloud of tobacco smoke. Mick had in the short interval lit a blackened, stumpy briar, and was drawing at it deeply. As Slade once more took up his position at the keyhole he saw the man cutting some plug tobacco with a

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penknife. The knife must have been blunt, for the man tugged at the tough strands of the weed, pressing the knife-blade hard against his thumb. When he had pared off enough he rubbed it up slowly in the palms of his hands, listening the while to the woman. His eyes were lowered, and the watchful Slade, his lashes touching the woodwork of the door, could not see the expression on his averted face.

Suddenly she stopped, and the detective heard her thank some one for a match.

"And now for our trump card," she went on, in a keener tone. Slade could almost visualize her sucking greedily at the doped cigarette that he knew she was smoking. "The card which will supply us with the odd trick which wins the game. The girl!"

Slade's ears tingled. Under their long, almost feminine-looking lashes, his blue-grey eyes sparkled dry and bright. A wrist as firm as a rock was pressed against his thigh. In his hand was his dark-coloured automatic. The butt became warm and moist in his hard grip.

Mick had knocked the warm embers from his pipe, and had refilled it from the dark plug in his hand.

He tried a compromise.

"What's the move exactly, boss?" he asked in an even, ingratiating tone, his thumb striking at the flint wheel of a petrol-lighter.

The woman, once more appealed to, accepted the submission.

"Slade, as you found out, Mick, is down here in the first place to investigate the affair at Greystones."

Mick pursed his thick lips, and the smoke issued in a stream.

"Yes—that's right, boss. Strange case to my mind. Suicide, the papers said. I tried to pump that

fellow Thorne, but he seemed scared stiff. He found the body."

"And it was he, remember, who told us that the new master, Sir Royston Gillespie, the son of the dead man, is thick with Slade. Now, that bright star of the police, Collins, has got his knife in the son for some reason or other. There's where our chance lies."

"I don't quite see."

Nor did Slade, who was puzzling his brain till it ached.

Mick had taken upon himself the task of spokesman for the rest of those in the room. The conversation lapsed into a dialogue between him and the woman.

"Play them off. Divert attention from ourselves."

Mick puffed harder, and the smoke rose thicker, eddying about his head.

"Still I'm not clear, I must admit, boss. Seems to me that kidnapping the girl is the best way of bringing them after us. Still, this is your move around. You'd better explain."

"Without harping back to the unpleasant topic of a few moments ago, we'll agree that we've already been pretty effectually brought to their notice."

There was a dry, sardonic grimness in the woman's way of dealing with the man.

Mick scowled, but said nothing. The woman continued:

"That being so, this move counts for little either way. Gillespie and Slade will be out to get the girl—and us! Collins, taken up with what touches himself, will be busying himself in the meantime with the Gillespie affair, for whatever it's worth to him. Now, as I said, he's got his knife for some reason or other

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into young Gillespie. And he isn't the sort to take it out unless he's got some one else to stick it into."

She paused.

"If we"—continuing—"using the girl as a bait, can get Gillespie out into the open, with appearances against him, Collins will be sure to pounce. Slade will be handicapped—balked. It ought to give us our chance. There happens to be one difficulty."

"What's that?"

"Slade knows what Collins is worth. He doesn't over-estimate his capabilities. Else why wasn't Collins in that chase last night—waiting for us in the town?"

Mick didn't answer for a moment.

"But the difficulty?" he said at last, evasively.

"That he'll keep Gillespie in the background—and move himself."

An ironic, appreciative smile curved the lips of the watching detective. The woman was proving deucedly uncanny in her summing up.

"On his own?"—incredulous.

"On his own!"—emphatic.

Mick's square shoulders shrugged.

"He wouldn't risk it. If I was asked my opinion"—drily—"I should say he wasn't mad. He's gone too far alive not to know the safety-line."

"Oh, he knows the safety-line all right," she remarked lightly.

"Eh—what d'you mean, boss?"

"He knows who killed Sir Giles Gillespie. He's got no need to worry on that score."

Something stuck in Mick's throat.

"Killed! But I thought suicide——"

"As you will. Anyway, what concerns us is that

he's not troubling himself about that case—because he knows the solution."

"Well, I'll be——" He checked himself in time, and glared round the room at the others in a half-stupefied way. His eyes returned to the woman. "I—but say, boss, how d'you come to know all this—eh?"

"It happened to be me who told him. That's how."

"Y-you!"

Mick's yellow teeth bit at the pipe-stem.

"Gawd—it beats me! I'm out of it! Why—blimey!—it was nosyin' after 'im that I got this!"

He touched the dirty piece of plaster adhering to his cheek. When Mick became agitated his speech was apt to lose what little of polish remained to it.

The woman's light laugh—a laugh Slade easily recognized—rang through the room.

That laugh ended on a quavering note.

"But listen!" she cried.

They must have been her footsteps that Slade heard crossing the floor, but she did not pass within his line of sight. He saw Mick take the pipe out of his mouth and slip it in a waistcoat-pocket. The man seemed jumpy.

"Listen!" she repeated, her voice nearer. "That reminds me! There is another danger! How could I have forgotten it?"

For an instant there was silence.

"Thorne! If he comes here he'll be trailed—and that'll——"

Her last words were drowned in Mick's explosive oath.

Again voices from the other parts of the room chimed in, asking, swearing.

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The voices rose louder, more insistent, almost threatening.

Slade, outside the door, his teeth clenched, ready to spring back into the darkness the moment anyone inside approached the door to open it, watched like a lynx.

Then he heard the woman's voice above the others, silencing them.

"There's nothing for it—we can't risk another faked 'phone-call. Some one's got to fetch him. And quick, too. He's got to be brought here! Mick——"

"Not me!" growled that surly individual. "If I got me 'ands anywhere near 'im, I'd break 'is blasted neck in two! Swelp me! 'E's caused us enough an' more damned trouble a'ready. I never understood why the devil 'e was let——"

She wasn't prepared to beat about the bush.

"Jerry!"

As the woman spoke the word from below came the sound of the hall door being slammed to with a force that made the front windows of the house rattle.

Downstairs in the hallway some one coughed, as though choking.

An instant before Mick's hand wrenched open the door, and a flood of yellow light swept across the landing, the nimble Slade had bounded into the blackness beyond, farther along the landing.

Mick called out.

Some one was blundering up the stairs, half singing to himself, half coughing with the exertion. There was a dull clink of glass against glass and a wheezy hiccough.

The man was muttering to himself.

The steps drew nearer, the gruff voice rising and

falling as the man wheezed his way up the stairs to the landing, breathing hard and panting heavily.

Slade heard a hand beating on the banister rail for guidance in the darkness.

Into the light filling the doorway stepped the tall shape of the woman. Her back was turned to Slade. He caught the white sheen of her neck against the black hair.

“That doddering, drunken sot—Worthy!”

There was a dangerous blend of disgust and rage in her voice.

The man rounded the top of the staircase, lurching and swaying heavily, and blundered along the landing toward the open doorway, groping for support at the wall.

The woman drew back.

Into the stream of light stumbled the bowed figure of a man hugging in his arms two bottles.

Slade’s tongue all of a sudden became as dry as a sheet of blotting-paper.

It was not the Ferret.

It was—Thorne!

CHAPTER XIV: *The Velvet Mask Again*

AT the doorway the butler reared himself, clutched at the woodwork, and collapsed, sunk too far into the maudlin state to help himself. One of the bottles slipped from his feeble grasp and rolled in a curve to the woman's feet. In an instant two pairs of arms had lifted him by the shoulders and propelled him into the room.

Slade heard the woman's hard breathing as she turned to follow.

The door was left open, and there was nothing for the detective to do but remain where he was.

The sound of voices asking questions floated from the room, and he heard the woman giving instructions to some one. Shortly afterward a man came out of the room and made his way down the stairs and out of the house by the front door. Then he heard the butler telling in a broken, disjointed manner how he had met the Ferret in the little public-house in the mews, and how after having several drinks together the Ferret had stopped to play a final game of darts with another couple of men he had met there, while he, Thorne, had come on to the house alone. The Ferret had proved obliging enough to have surrendered his key—so the butler explained by degrees, taking his own time—saying that he would come on later, when he had finished his game. He, Thorne, had remembered to bring a couple of bottles for the boys, but he had to get back—get back . . .

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At that point he stuck, still trying to get back.

Soon he was snoring regularly and windily.

Another man came out of the room, paused, peering round in the darkness, and cumbrously made his way down the stairs. A few moments later Slade heard him moving about below, in the kitchen. At last, after several minutes had elapsed, the woman and Mick came to the door together. They stood for a moment on the landing in the light, conversing in a low tone. Then the woman switched off the light, pulled the door to, and passed on to the head of the stairs, followed by Mick, who cursed the banisters because he couldn't see them.

Luckily for Slade the switch for the landing light was on the far side of the door, and the woman had not—probably knowing the house well—thought to turn it on.

When the sound of footsteps on the stairs had died away the detective groped about for the door he now knew to be at the end of the passage. His fingers closed over a cold handle. He turned it softly, and pressed with his shoulder.

The door opened with the faintest creak, and he passed into the room.

With every care he closed the door behind him.

At once he became aware that one of the windows in the room was open. The curtains were swelling in the slight breeze, and the cool air met his face. Outside, he heard the rustle of leafless trees.

Then he pressed the button of his electric flash-lamp.

As he had thought, the room was in the front of the house, square-shaped, overlooking the front garden. There was very little furniture in it—a table, three chairs, a chest of drawers, and a large settee.

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Quietly and quickly Slade set to work.

Then, after his preliminary examination of the room's contents, he crossed to the windows, and after shutting the open one noiselessly, drew the blinds.

He switched on the light.

On one of the chairs, thrown haphazardly, were a woman's hat and coat. Underneath the coat Slade found a handbag and a pair of gloves.

It took but a second's investigation to establish that these articles belonged to Paula Dane.

The silk monogram "P. D." was worked into the dark blue morocco of the handbag, and similar smaller initials were sewn to the linings of the coat collar and the hat. As for the gloves, they were of soft grey suède with embroidered backs and tops. There were no initials affixed to them, but on holding each glove to his nose Slade smelt a faint, hazy perfume, nothing nearly as pungent as lilac, but lighter, fresher.

The same perfume as had been used by the owner of the handkerchief he had found in the park at Greystones.

The garments spoke eloquently for themselves.

Where—what room? was the question Slade repeated to himself.

The chest of drawers was a simple matter. After hastily running through the varied assortment of women's under-garments in the three larger drawers he turned his attention to the two smaller top drawers. In one of these he found nothing of interest save a silver box half filled with cigarettes. In the other he came across something more intriguing, a lead casket containing several round cardboard boxes.

The seal of one of the boxes was broken.

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He removed the lid, and held the box to the light. Inside was a white crystalline powder. Curiously Slade dipped in his little finger and raised it to his tongue.

Cocaine!

With every care he replaced the box, and after extracting two cigarettes from the other drawer he relocked both, placed the cigarettes in his own case, and, turning off the light, once more stepped to the window and drew aside the blind.

Cordwayne Terrace, for as far as he could see, was deserted. Softly he recrossed to the door. Then for a brief moment the danger of his position there alone in the house, with the gang between him and the street, and the long risk he was running, made him pause, contemplating a way of retreat. His outstretched hand remained outstretched, touching nothing. He wondered whether he had been altogether wise—whether it would not have been better to have . . .

His teeth grated together. The moment of weakness passed.

Somewhere in the house was Paula Dane. Somewhere else in the house was the secret—the mystery—of this gang.

The door closed softly behind the set-faced detective, and his steady hand silently released the handle. Stealthily he crept along the landing, feeling at the wall for the framework of the doorway.

He found it, and the next moment a small circle of light played round the keyhole of the door at which a short while ago he had been kneeling. Another moment, and he had glided inside, his deft fingers securing the latch with one silent turn.

Holding his breath, he stood with his back flat

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against the wall, feet spread apart, listening for the sonorous breathing of the drunken butler.

Five—ten—fifteen seconds he waited there, motionless—but the silence of the room was as the silence of the tomb.

He began thinking quickly.

He took another breath—slowly. Had something gone wrong? Why couldn't he hear the man's breathing? Why . . . ?

Another fifteen seconds passed. Slade stepped away from the wall. A sudden suspicion darted into his mind, firing his thoughts.

He clicked on his torch, and foot by foot swept its thin bright ray across the whole length and breadth of the room.

The room was empty!

Slade swallowed hard, feeling at the moment much like a man who has been swindled.

What was the butler's game?

The mystery was deepening at every turn he took. If the butler was tricking the gang, it was true also that he was tricking Slade and the police.

Who was he?

He was Richard Thorne. The detective had ample evidence as to that.

But—who else?

There in the darkness the detective's tireless brain strove to find a disconnected thread in the intricately woven web, some single strand whereby he might proceed to unravel at least part of the tangled skein.

He stood still by the table in the centre of the room, one hand—the one holding his unlit flash-lamp—resting on the polished surface. He remembered that Thorne—if that was the man's name—was

the last person who had seen Sir Giles alive. And the first who had discovered him dead!

Yet even as the thought crossed his mind he recollected the first impression he had received of the man. There had been an indefinable something about him that Slade had at once reached and appreciated. The man was not of the usual snobbish class of individuals who take to servile flunkying as a duck takes to water. He had an air, an address, a personality . . .

Words and thoughts unworded rushed through Slade's mind with the rousing impetus of a river in spate.

He knew himself that the night's work so far had keyed him up to a high pitch, that he was in that peculiar frame of mind, known only to himself, when he might reach out at some fleeting thought, some passing recollection of an instant, and read something that spelled truth.

And, perhaps not unnaturally, he found his thoughts going back to the butler. The man was supplying his own leavening of mystery.

The man's various connexions in the case passed before Slade's open mind in a lightning-like review. He was the only one who had seen the woman on the night of the murder. He had been the man who had identified the body at the inquest. He had been the man who had changed the stoppers in the whisky decanter—perhaps the man who had thrown away the spirit. He had certainly led Slade to believe that Sir Giles had recently imbibed, helping thereby the false suggestion that the baronet had purposely made himself drunk—in order to commit suicide.

Slade wondered at himself. There was something, he knew, at the back of his mind, but as yet he hadn't

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touched it. He realized that all this he had known on the day when he had made the examination. Most of it was enlarged in his report at Scotland Yard. But he was frankly more puzzled than ever.

Thorne was tricking the gang! He had already tricked Collins and Sir Royston! Almost—he had tricked Slade. In fact, if it hadn't been for that chance encounter at the Élite Garage, Slade doubted very much whether he would have regarded the man with more than just the 'ordinary time, place, and opportunity' suspicion which was attached temporarily to every one at Greystones.

The possibility of Thorne being the murderer of the baronet Slade had considered as many times as he had that of the woman, who had visited the baronet shortly before his death, and Mick, whom Slade had discovered spying on him, and Sir Royston, whose word he was accepting largely on trust, and all the others implicated, including even Paula Dane herself.

Because certain circumstances which could be explained in a perfectly normal and fitting sequence could also be turned about and made to indicate something totally different was no reason for the hard-thinking Slade to place an undue suspicion on any man.

No one realized more truly the evils of prejudice.

Of one thing in this case, however, Slade was certain, had been certain all along. The murderer of Sir Giles Gillespie, whoever he was, had been impelled by a motive of more than ordinary power. That murder had been the net result of a great deal of assiduous planning and scheming beforehand—perhaps for weeks, or even months.

And that was where Slade lost the thread he had singled out. He could ascribe to Thorne no motive other than that of petty narrowness or spite, which

one might lay to the charge of any murdered man's butler.

It wasn't good enough.

Again, the murderer must have worked with devilish cunning, as those two perplexing letters in Sir Giles' handwriting—and, on reliable evidence, posted by the baronet himself—evinced. In some way or other—how, Slade had to admit he had no idea—the baronet had been brought to sign a warrant for his own death.

Had the butler tricked Sir Giles as well?

It was a question Slade had no hope of answering for some while.

Perplexing—yes. In more ways than one the baronet's own actions just before his death were perplexing. The instance Collins had cited—the false moustache . . .

Slade found his thoughts wandering again, and checked them abruptly. Neither time nor place was opportune.

He must have been standing by the table some three minutes. It could not have been more.

Guided by the ray from his torch, he moved toward the other door in the room, that through which the woman had entered. Slade was determined to make a decided move.

Reaching the door, he paused, alert.

He fancied that from the other side he heard some one moving about, fumbling.

He listened. He was sure now that some one was moving. After a short space he thought he could distinguish some one speaking in an undertone.

Yet no light showed under the door from the room beyond. Once again he caught that faint sound, as of some one talking—whispering.

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As he waited there he slipped the torch into his pocket and drew out his automatic. The time had come to think of using it. With his left hand he jammed the peak of his cloth cap low over his eyes and buttoned his coat collar.

Then he dropped his hand to the door-knob.

The spring of the lock flew back at his touch with a sharp click.

Avoidance was impossible.

Seizing the bull by the horns, Slade slid into the room and pushed the door to with his elbow.

From somewhere in the room came a smothered sigh. His gun-barrel levelled to the horizontal, covering himself in the darkness, Slade groped along the wall until his fingers came in contact with the light-switch.

He pressed it down—and blinked.

Bound hand and foot and gagged, and lying on a bed against the farther wall, was—Paula Dane.

The woman's startled eyes stared into Slade's.

A second later the detective had removed the gag and was untying the twisted linen knots binding her wrists and ankles.

For several moments after he had freed her they remained looking at each other, the detective puzzled at the ease with which the knots had been untied, the woman collecting her scattered thoughts.

"Well, Miss Dane?"

Why he should have spoken those words, and in the tone he did, Slade did not know. Yet he was well aware that he was standing there, revolver in hand, apparently waiting for her to explain—something.

"Mr—oh!—Mr Slade!"

Slade remembered his disguise and nodded.

"You weren't left for long, you see, Miss Dane,"

he went on, in a more affable tone, his eyes travelling beyond her.

The slim, shapely shoulders of Sir Royston's *fiancée* rose and fell in one laden sigh. The detective caught the warm glitter of diamonds as she passed a hand over her forehead.

"N-no!" she stammered, rallying. Then she glanced round the room quickly, as though looking for something she did not expect to see, and back to the detective. There was an air of suppressed nervousness about her, Slade noted.

"What's happened?" she breathed at last.

Slade was watching her narrowly. She was labouring under an effort. There was something on her mind.

"Nothing!" Slade answered her question shortly. "I've just come to make sure of you—that's all."

She was on her feet now, standing upright before him, both hands pressed to her head. At his words her eyes flashed him a startled glance.

"Why do you say that? Why should you—make sure of me?"

Slade looked at her long and queerly.

"Why shouldn't I, Miss Dane—after this?" He motioned with his left hand to the room.

Her bright, swimming eyes faltered.

"Yes—yes!" she exclaimed hurriedly. "Of course—yes! Ah, Mr Slade, forgive me! Your coming was so sudden! And after lying so long—in the dark—thinking—wondering—— And yes, of course you came. I mean——"

She stopped, confused, at a blank. Her bewildered blue eyes misted.

"It would be better if you explained, Miss Dane," remarked Slade, in a low voice, not unkindly.

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"Explain! I don't know anything—— I mean there's nothing for me to explain. What should there be?"

Her tone was half defiant, half pleading. Slade felt decidedly uncomfortable.

"That's what I am asking you, Miss Dane!"

His voice was a little firmer.

She turned half aside, not meeting his eyes and their question.

"There's nothing—nothing!" Her voice was low, husky. "I—I'm not quite myself, Mr Slade. This house—these people—I didn't think—expect——"

It was an axiom with Slade that where he saw no use, there he wasted no time.

"We're not out of the wood yet, Miss Dane. You must pull yourself together."

He spoke a little sharply. Without being unduly pessimistic, the straits they were in were not far from being desperate.

"I know—I know"—pensively. She glanced back at Slade with melting eyes, crisp wavelets of her light brown hair nestling low against her pale cheeks. Her smile was wistful—the smile of a woman striving to be plucky, fighting her own nature.

Slade looked into her face and wondered.

With the back of her hand she brushed aside the dishevelled hair. Her eyes shone with a keen lustre, clear and tearless. A hint of colour stained her cheeks.

"What are you going to do, Mr Slade?"

There was a trusting faith in her voice. Slade remembered the baronet, and thought twice before he spoke.

"Sir Royston doesn't know I'm here. This is a

little adventure on my own," he remarked drily. "I'm planning to spring him a pleasant surprise."

"He doesn't know——"

Her voice trembled.

Slade saw what had flashed at once to her mind, and patted her on the arm reassuringly.

"Yes—he knows what happened! And he's worried—anxious. He's upset. But he doesn't know that I've found you—nor do any of the others."

She stared at him, her red lips parted in amazement.

"You—haven't told them—that you knew where I was! You mean—you are here on your own! Alone!"

Slade withdrew his hand. There was the merest suggestion of reserve in his manner.

"They couldn't have helped—any of them—not here!" He spoke rather fiercely, as though anxious to vindicate himself. Then his voice steadied. "It's up to us—up to you, Miss Dane. We've got to get out somehow—got to run the gauntlet. It's a case of neck or nothing!"

His words were uttered in an impressive tone. He was inwardly fretting at the time that had been wasted.

She bowed her head in silence, as though she well understood the purport of his words.

"Those others—that woman and those men—they are downstairs! Here in the house!"

"They're in the kitchen. It gives us a chance."

"A chance!"

The word seemed to fascinate her. She repeated it as though it held some special meaning for her.

Slade grew more and more anxious as the seconds

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passed, and she remained there in that passive state. Allowing for all that the strain might have told on her, she should have pulled herself together before this.

The detective took a thoughtful turn up the room and back again, coming to pause before her.

She lifted her eyes.

"Now, you really must try to brace yourself, Miss Dane. I know it'll take an effort. But it is an effort that's got to be made. You must——"

He stopped short.

Paula Dane had risen, and like one dazed had crossed to the door. There she hesitated, and the detective saw her tremble with emotion.

He glanced aside, frowning slightly.

She reached out a hand to the door. But before she could touch it Slade saw the door open.

Paula Dane fell back with a short, strangled cry.

Into the room had stepped—the woman in the velvet mask!

CHAPTER XV: *Lionel Gillespie!*

Too late Slade jumped to the bed. Before he could grab his automatic the woman's arm had jerked up.

"Not a second time—Mr Slade!"

There was a cool quality in the tone that made the detective wince. He marvelled at the rapidity of her recovery.

Paula Dane stood by, gazing like one stupefied. She reeled.

Adroitly the other woman caught her with her left arm, and lowered her into a chair at the foot of the bed, the while she covered Slade.

She faced the Yard man.

"Once more the principals meet!"

Slade shrugged. From the expression of his face, his mind might very well have registered a blank.

"You were warned!"

She almost hissed the words at him. The gun in her hand was pointed just below his left shoulder.

"And you?"

His lips barely moved.

"I?"

A slight frown, like a summer cloud, passed over that part of her face that was visible, and was gone.

"Were you not warned—too?"

The line of her mouth drew thinner, harder.

"Mr Slade, you can save your breath. If it helped you once, bluffing won't help you any now."

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The pause was tense—as though maintained under a strain. The silence was broken by a hard sob from Paula Dane.

“No.” Slade exerted himself to keep his voice even. “The time for bluffing is past—for both of us!”

He saw the involuntary stiffening of her body above the hips.

“You trifle!”

“I mean what I say!”

She came a step nearer, the gun in her hand on a level with his thumping heart, menacing, and her dark eyes bored into his.

“That is foolish in the circumstances.”

She hesitated.

“There is one chance—prove it!”

He felt more than saw the eyes of both women focused on him. The one, fearful; the other—he wasn’t sure. His head whirled. A sudden chill gripped him, he felt dizzy. It was as though he stood on a brink, looking down at—space.

“Shoot! Shoot—and be damned!”

It was the gesture of a madman. He felt mad all in a moment. The chill had passed. Hot blood raced through his veins, tormenting him. His head swam, warm, light.

He had flung her challenge back in her face.

And he saw her shudder—and the sinuous tightening of the white finger crooked round the trigger.

Her face blurred. Things danced before his eyes.

C—crack!

The mist passed, and as the gun span from her hand and rattled against the floor he wheeled round, stumbling.

The dark stuff curtain in the farther corner of the

room had parted, revealing the hunched figure of—
Richard Thorne!

The butler came forward slowly, glancing to left and right. His right hand grasped a smoking revolver. He looked neither to Slade nor to the woman in the velvet mask, but to Paula Dane.

She rose, dazed, and staggered a few steps. Across the room floated the thin cloud of revolver-smoke.

“Quick! Before those others get here!”

Thorne gripped her by the arm and thrust her before him, bodily. Slade’s attention, for the moment, was distracted from the other woman. He had wrenched open the door when he was stopped by her amazed cry of recognition.

“God! You—you! Lionel—here!”

The butler stiffened like one who has received an unexpected blow, his hand falling to his side.

The moment was hazardous. Slade acted.

Seizing Paula Dane by one arm, he somehow managed to get her into the farther room. Footsteps sounded outside on the stairs, and a hubbub of noisy voices. There was not a moment to be lost. Slade tore the small Webley from his hip-pocket, fired one wild, smashing shot across the landing, point-blank, and slammed the door, hitching a chair-back under the flimsy lock.

Another second and he had ripped aside the venetian blind and swung up the window, letting in a rush of cool night air. Without hesitating he clambered up and over the sill, and with one leg dangling over he turned to Paula Dane.

“Follow! And when I say go—drop!”

He edged his way to the end, and then released his precarious hold on the sill. He landed with a heavy jolt on the tiled roof of the scullery.

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In an instant he was up and on his feet. At his sharp word of command the woman's slim shape swayed outward and down. With sure arms he caught her, as her soft body sagged limp against him, her hair brushing his face, and he breathed a hasty word of reassurance in her ear. Pluckily she raised a smile, fighting back the weakness cramping her limbs, and strove to back him up. He let her down gently, and saw her totter unsteadily toward the garden path. As he prepared to follow the door below creaked open, and a man stepped out, peering round in the darkness.

Slade crouched—and jumped him.

The man went down in a crumpled heap, breaking the detective's fall. Slade rose to his feet, leaving the huddled body in the darkness outside the scullery door, and turned to follow the woman.

The sound of voices raised in noisy inquiry came from the house. Some one was above at the open window. From inside the room came the sharp, double bark of a revolver. Some one else swore hoarsely, and fired at random into the darkness. Slade saw the livid flash of orange flame, and heard one of the bullets strike dully against the stone coping a few yards away.

He ran for it.

By the tool-shed he came up with Paula Dane, waiting for him, wide-eyed and quivering. His sudden appearance seemed to startle her.

She clutched his arm and clung to it.

"Who is he?" she panted.

The detective's face was close to hers, his eyes level with her own.

"He?"

"The butler—that Thorne! Who is he?"

Slade fell back, staggered.

"Who is he?" he exclaimed, momentarily at a loss, although he understood the words well enough.

"Yes—tell me! Now!"

"I don't——"

She interrupted him.

"You do! You know you do, Mr Slade! I saw it in your face—in that room—when you were at the window!"

"You heard her?"

"Yes—I heard her"—softly.

"Well?"

"I—I—don't understand?"

"No!"

There was that in his voice which caused her to look up quickly.

"What is it? What is it you're thinking, Mr Slade?"

Slade caught his breath and rallied.

"I'm wondering, Miss Dane, why you hid Thorne."

A breeze stirred the brown ringlets about the white oval face. In the close darkness her eyes glowed warmly.

"Why—why," she cried, "he was there to help me—as you were!"

"Help you!" Vague suspicions chased through his mind. "Then why didn't you tell me—then?"

"Because he told me to do nothing—say nothing—until he gave me the word."

"I see!"

Slade felt convinced from her tone, despite his late experience, that she was speaking the truth. Yet he couldn't understand it. And the woman in the velvet mask—"Lionel!" . . .

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Voices sounded somewhere close in the darkness beyond, hushed voices.

"Quick!" he breathed in Paula Dane's ear, grasping her again by the arm. "We've wasted too long already."

For a second she was held in his arms, then he dropped her lightly over the wall and clambered over himself.

"This way!"

Still holding her by the arm, revolver in the other hand, he almost dragged her along the dimly lit passageway, past the flickering gas-jet and the now darkened windows of the closed public-house. Slade stumbled against something soft and bulky in the shadow. Releasing the woman's arm, he pulled out his electric torch and switched it on. Across the narrow court stretched the bound figure of a man, trussed and gagged. Slade gasped.

Two green eyes were staring blankly at him, eloquent with appeal.

The Ferret!

Slade switched off his torch, stepped over the man, and guided the woman into the mews.

The garage doorway was open, and a light shone behind the large "PETROL" sign above it. Some one inside was whistling softly to himself.

A few seconds later Slade and the woman were in the street.

There Slade drew up, for the moment at a loss how to proceed. The moments that were slipping by were precious. He daren't risk leaving the gang, although he had Sir Royston's *fiancée* on his hands.

Then a happy thought came to his mind.

If he had not been bamboozled, Brawley's man

who had been stationed at Greystones should be somewhere close at hand. From what Slade knew of the man it seemed unlikely that the butler could have shaken him off.

Thorne—"Lionell" . . .

Farther down the road was a small church. He gave the girl instructions to go there and wait until he came. There were questions he wanted to put to her, but they had to be waived in the need of the moment.

He stood watching her pass down the road, then turned and ran back to Cordwayne Terrace. The road was deserted as he rounded the corner. Somewhere close by a clock chimed the third quarter of an hour. Half-way along, however, he caught sight of a man standing in the shadow of some trees in a front garden, smoking a cigarette.

He walked by without slackening his pace, crossed to the other side of the road, and doubled back.

It was Brawley's man—Simms.

The Flying Squad man put his heel on the cigarette end when Slade spoke to him. He had been watching No. 11 for something like an hour he stated. Thought he had heard sounds of firing, but wasn't sure. Not having seen his man—or anyone—— He stopped. Yes, now he came to think of it, there had been some one leave the house, soon after the butler had entered.

The man grinned broadly when Slade asked him where he had parked his cycle. The house second from the end on the other side of the road was untenanted. He had secreted his machine in the front garden, ready against an emergency.

And the butler's?

In some garage affair up a little mews round the

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corner. A dingy-looking sort of a place, with a steam-laundry on one corner at the entrance.

He went on to tell how some time had elapsed as he waited for the butler to return from the garage—about half an hour, offhand.

Slade questioned him as to what time that had been.

About a quarter to eleven he thought.

The butler, had he appeared sober?

Yes. Although, now that Mr Slade asked the question, he had thought at the time that the man seemed rather flurried. But drunk—no, decidedly no.

Then Slade inquired what time the licensed houses in the town closed on ordinary week-nights.

The man looked at him as though he thought the detective was suffering under an undue strain. But one glance at the hard-set face with the two gimlet-like eyes was enough. He answered civilly enough. Ten o'clock.

Slade glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch.

Ten minutes to twelve.

The man's times fitted in all right.

The detective and Simms took a quiet stroll up the road, keeping watchful eyes on the house on the opposite side. Twenty yards or so farther down they crossed over and walked back. They kept close to the kerb, in order to obtain a better vantage-point, and were almost level with the front gate of No. 11 when Slade drew his companion back against the railing of the next house.

The front door of the house they were watching had opened. Some one stood under the porch on the top step.

A man.

He came down the steps slowly, as though thinking over something, possibly instructions.

As he turned his back to close the front gate he felt a light touch on his shoulder, and wheeled about to stare down the thin-lipped barrel of Slade's Webley.

He tried to back, but Simms, who had drawn to one side, was waiting for some such move, and as the man's hands slipped behind him the bracelets clicked locked.

Then he started to swear.

Slade ran experienced fingers over the man's clothes, and removed a businesslike automatic from his hip-pocket. At sight of this, and realizing that the game was up as far as he was concerned, the man turned sullen, and threatened.

He was a stranger to Slade.

The detective nodded to Simms.

"Another less. You'd better trot him along while the going's go-able."

Simms, who was young to be in the Flying Squad, grinned.

"You bet, Mr Slade."

Cursing the detective and all his works between his teeth, the man shuffled off to the sharp jerk from the Flying Squad man.

Once more Slade was left to face his problem alone. Before him was the house. What it held he didn't stop to think of. His fears and misgivings had left him. He was feeling unreasonably angry, having a vague idea that in some way he had acted childishly.

It was the old question of gaining admittance—and quickly, too.

He knew that the woman would not prove slow

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in acting. Perhaps, even now, she was planning a getaway. And the butler . . .

For the third time since he had left the house the butler crossed his mind, and for the first time he spared a minute to think over what had happened there in the room where he had found Paula Dane.

It had all been so sudden that his recollection was a hazy and uncertain one.

Richard Thorne—Lionel Gillespie!

He took a deep breath.

Here was another story—another mystery—to be cleared up.

The butler—the brother. One and the same. The discovery, now that it had been made, failed to strike him with the force that might have been expected. He felt strangely unperturbed—unelated. There was something wrong—something that must be thought of. There was a link—one that would connect . . .

It meant a great step forward—it placed new possibilities, a new view-point altogether, before him. But it was a step which he did not feel satisfied in having made, for some peculiar reason. The possibilities, he gave little or no thought to them.

He was experienced enough to know that the possibilities had been present all the time—latent, maybe—but none the less present.

With an almost physical effort he strove to oust the butler from his mind. The woman in the velvet mask—there lay all the work he could hope to tackle for the present.

“Once more the principals meet!”

Her words came back to him, and he read in them a new challenge. All that was dogged in him rose to the surface.

Twice he paced along the few yards of pavement

before the house, and twice he came to a halt, undecided. At the third pause he opened the gate, for the second time that night.

As he did so a light showed in the upper window with the blinds drawn—the room, he calculated, in which he had found Paula Dane's clothes.

A shadow, human, blurred and immense, moved across the blind, and he murmured a little chuckle of joy. The shadow disappeared, and he sprang up the front steps and pressed the bell-push.

He stood there waiting in the porch some time, listening for the sound of approaching footsteps along the hallway.

After several moments had passed with no response from the inmates he pressed the bell again, and held his finger to it.

This time he heard some one coming.

Under his cap his face was unseen, and his tweed coat reached well below his knees.

The door opened, and a man stood before him.

"Is that you, Sam? Why the devil couldn't you dig for your key, makin' anyone——"

The voice trailed to a faint gurgle and ceased. Slade's grip on the man's throat was unrelaxing, and surprise added an advantage that left the other without a chance. The man's limbs for one horrible moment were drawn rigid, then relaxed, and his body swayed forward, limp and inanimate. Thirty seconds later Slade had tied the man's wrists with his own boot-laces, twisted together, and was gagging him securely with his scarf.

That done, he hunched the body up in one corner of the porch. It was probably the short and sharp method adopted by the butler, he reflected, as he straightened his back.

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Then Slade stepped inside and quietly closed the door—and bolted it.

As he groped his way across the hall he hastily summed up the others of the gang—known to him—who remained in the house. There were the woman herself, Mick, and Jerry. The latter was to some extent incapacitated by his injured arm.

But there was the butler—Lionel Gillespie—to be reckoned with also. No mean adversary, as he had shown—if only Slade knew where he stood with the man. Thorne—as Slade still thought of him—was playing a lone and puzzling game. The detective had altered his views in the past hour or so. Whereas he had before considered the gang as duping the butler, he now looked upon Thorne as duping the gang—for his own ends.

Only—Thorne had failed to reckon with the woman in the velvet mask.

What the man's object could be Slade failed to arrive at. If he had murdered his brother, as the woman believed, why, then, should he have taken the trouble . . . ?

At the foot of the stairs the detective caught his breath sharply. Something had come to his mind which made his brain reel.

Good God! If it was true, then—then he—Lionel Gillespie—was Paula Dane's father!

Richard Thorne—the butler—the father of Sir Royston's *fiancée*! The brother of Sir Giles!

The woman's question in the garden a short time ago came back to him with a new and astounding significance. Had she, by some strange freak of psychological action, suddenly found something familiar in the butler?

His reason at once answered no. Lionel Gillespie

—if he was Thorne—as evidence could show, had been living at Greystones as Richard Thorne the butler for years, and if during that time she had not . . .

His line of thought was diverted at a sudden and bewildering tangent.

Sir Giles—the murdered man—he must have known that Thorne was his own brother!

It wasn't possible that the disguise had been kept up for years—or even adopted—without his knowledge. He must have known—all those years. Something must have revealed the deception—if it was one—that the man who posed as his butler, who received his money week by week, was his brother—the father of his ward!

Sir Giles must have known—have, perhaps, sanctioned it!

The enigma was revolving on itself.

But why had he given that sanction? For such he must have done! Had all that about Richard Thorne, the man who had been gassed, been nothing more than sheer bunk? Had Sir Giles and his brother been living a lie—purposely?

They were shattering questions—questions whose answers, when elucidated, might throw a lurid light on the lives of both the brothers Gillespie.

This line of argument, however, as Slade realized instinctively, did not fit in with what Dr Bruce had explained to him. Sir Giles' hate for his brother, his hate for the trick that Fate had played him in his early days, that hate which had all but wrecked the life of his only son—no line of reasoning which Slade might hope to pursue would place this recent discovery, and all it hinted at, consistent and in keeping with that.

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Yet Sir Giles was murdered. Murdered—Slade hesitated even now—by this man, his brother.

He hesitated because he saw in clearly outlined perspective all that such a life of compromise and deceit would hold—for both. It would mean, sooner or later, the lashing of that hate to an ungovernable fury, or else—jealousy. And jealousy, in its turn, would mean a return of that hate. Later—a crisis.

Had that tragic night seen the crisis?

He couldn't say.

Perhaps . . .

Again he was confounded by the thought of those letters. Sir Giles had written them—he *had*. He wanted to believe that he hadn't. It would make things so much simpler. But he knew too well that the baronet had. The evidence was flawless.

There was the rub.

He mounted the stairs, subconsciously stepped over the ninth, and, treading softly, turned along the landing.

The door at the end was open. Light was streaming through. Slade paused again, listening for the sound of voices. But all was silent. He crept cautiously to the doorway, and paused again, holding his breath, and fumbling at the collar of his coat.

Still no sound.

He pushed back the door, wide, and entered, to pull up short with a smothered exclamation.

For a moment he stood speechless, immovable.

Lying on the floor, motionless, was Mick. By his side was the knife that had lain him there and a pool of fresh blood. There was blood—wet blood—on his boots and on the carpet.

Slade raised him carefully. The man was bleeding freely from a new wound in the side. As Slade

propped his head up with a cushion from the settee, and spread Paula Dane's coat over him, he opened his eyes with a little flicker at the light, wincing as though with pain, and gurgled something incoherently.

Slade bent over him to catch the muttered sounds. Several times the man struggled before the rumbling in his throat was clear enough for Slade to make anything of it.

The words came falteringly. His chin rose as he fought desperately for breath.

"It—it was—'im! A-ah!"

Slade held him higher.

"She—she wouldn't agree—so—so I—I got kinda—kinda w-wild. Y-yes, mad like. Then she started on about Ma-mazer. I—I drew me—me gun—didn't mean—an'—an'—kinda thought—an'—'e stuck—stuck me!"

His mind was clouding over.

"Who?" whispered Slade gently, in the man's ear. The glazed eyes stared at him blankly.

"'Im—'e knifed me—'cos—'cos I pulled me—me gun! Butta didn't—did—— Urrgh!"

The warm blood stained his lips, and he fell back coughing and reaching.

He shivered and sucked at his lips noisily, tasting the blood.

"Who? Who knifed you?"

Mick shook his head as though to clear it.

"'Oo?"

"Yes—who did it?"

The heavy eyes flickered and fell.

"'Im!"

Slade lowered his head gently on to the cushion, and rose. There was no caution about him now.

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He switched on the landing light and in another moment was down in the hall.

The telephone stood on a small wicker-work table.

He picked up the receiver—and put it down.

The flex had been severed!

CHAPTER XVI: *A Crisis*

A low insistent ringing of the door-bell caused Slade to drop the strands and unbolt the door. Outside in the porch stood Brawley and three of his men.

"Well, Tony—what's the count?"

"Nine—and the gong-stroke saved 'em!"

Brawley stepped inside with one of his men. One of the other two proceeded to untie the man who had answered Slade's ring, and get him to his feet. Outside in the road, drawn in to the kerb, was one of the Flying Squad tenders.

The two members of the Flying Squad followed Slade upstairs and into the room where Mick was lying unconscious, his heavy breathing rattling in his throat.

Slade explained what he thought to be necessary, and Brawley, knowing his man, did not press him further.

"H'm! Need to leave a man here with him—in that state. You say the wire's cut?"

Slade nodded moodily.

"Well, we can't shift him on our own—he's sunk too far. Besides, there's another little programme to fill out—eh?"

He glanced up at Slade, who was staring at the chest of drawers.

"No, we can't shift him," repeated the other absently, as though only vaguely aware of what

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Brawley had said; "and we've another programme to fill out—as you say."

Brawley's dark eyes followed Slade's.

"What is it?"

"I wonder!"

Slade crossed to the chest of drawers and pulled open one of the smaller two.

"As I thought—emptied."

Brawley said nothing. It was plain that Slade had something on his mind and was turning it over.

After a short interval, during which he busied himself ransacking what was left in the two top drawers, Slade came back to the other side of the room, where Brawley's man was closely scrutinizing Paula Dane's coat.

"You can leave that," he said crisply, "until the ambulance arrives."

He turned to Brawley, who nodded to his man to lay the coat aside.

"I suppose Simms told you, Abe?"

Brawley nodded again. He wasn't quite satisfied at being left so much in the dark; but he knew better than to complain. Slade had a queer knack of settling down on the right track—at least, on a track that generally led somewhere. So Brawley waited. There was no use that he could see in kicking against the pricks. It was common talk at the Yard that Slade had one abiding vice—reticence.

"Where is he now?"

"Simms?"

"Yes."

"At the station. We couldn't do anything else."

"H'm—no."

For a few seconds Slade stalked about the room,

hands deep in his coat pockets. At last he came to a standstill by the door.

"Rocks Dallow," he fired, lifting his chin aggressively, "—when was the patrol recalled?"

"This afternoon. Of course, the main road——"

"Yes, I know—that."

Slade took another turn. He seemed strangely nervous about something, altogether unlike his usual self.

"And the wires?"

"Fletcher saw to them. We shan't lose anything, if that's what's getting——"

"It's not!"

In the face of which there was nothing more to say.

Slade took out his pipe, filled it, and struck a match. After a few long, consoling draws:

"We'd better be moving. They've had enough time. I'll explain as we go."

For the briefest of moments Brawley held back. He saw things in a different light. His practical mind had an objection to raise.

"What about this place? A search now would——ought to——"

Slade shook his head, and softly blew the loose grey ash from the rim of his pipe-bowl.

"No time. Besides, Collins can do that well enough—it's his job. He'll be interested"—reflectively.

He was about to step outside the room when Mick moved his head and recommenced mumbling something inaudibly to himself.

Slade was soon bending over him, his pipe forgotten, Brawley on the other side. Between them they managed to prop him up gently.

"Stuck me 'cos I got me gun out—oh—a-ah!"

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He became a dead weight in their arms.

"Butta wouldn't 'a done it—if—if—— It—it was—wasn't fair—square dealing."

Once more the faint whisper died in his throat. The exertion had been too much for him. With a little sigh he drooped, his head lolling to one side against Slade's arm. They lowered him gently.

Slade's puzzled eyes met Brawley's.

Together they rose, and quietly left the room.

The man Slade had tricked in the hall was taken along in the police tender to Falcon Mews.

There Slade and Brawley and one of the latter's men alighted, and proceeded up the badly lighted court-way to the petrol-station at the top. They found the Ferret where Slade and Paula Dane had left him, snoring sullenly. When roused and untied he sat up, blinking.

Then he saw Slade's face.

"Aw—Mr Slade hisself! Gawd be praised! You're a gent—you are, sir. Some cove near did fer me. Country mobsman, an'——"

It must suddenly have occurred to him that he was saying a deal too much. And there was no benignant look in the detective's face—not even a grin.

The Ferret began to whine.

"You ain't fer pinchin' me, are yer? Yer ain't got nuffin' agin me—swelp me!" he put in guardedly, at once on the defensive. "When a bloke starts a-treading o' the thorny path fer righteousness' sake there's shure ter be them as er scriptural, an'll block the blinkin' right o' way. Yer can't pinch me if yer ain't——"

Left alone to the none too tender mercies of the Flying Squad man, the Ferret's tone changed to one of lofty sarcasm.

Crossing the mews, Brawley and Slade entered the garage.

The peak-capped attendant came forward, shuffling, and, catching sight of Slade, whom he recognized, stopped short.

His bloated face purpled.

"'Ere—I thought as I'd told you to clear aht an'——"

"You did."

Slade caught Brawley's eye and he gave him the tip.

Brawley nodded, and stepped into the breach.

"I'm representing Scotland Yard. You'll just give us any information we require, my man."

The man's jaw dropped, and he stared first at Brawley, then at Slade, and back again, helpless for the moment.

"Scawtlan' Yawrd! Divil—the p'lice!"

When he had sufficiently recovered, but still keeping a wary eye on Slade, whom he plainly distrusted, and who had none of his sympathies, he answered the questions they put to him.

A lady and two gents had called for the car—yes, that was right, it was a Daimler. He remembered the mascot on the radiator—a naked woman waving a stick and balancing on one foot. No, the motorcycle was still in the garage—they could see it if they pleased. That was it—just inside the door there. Had he noticed anything peculiar about either of the men? Well, he couldn't say—his job was to inspect their cars, not their clothes. They had shown the receipt, and that was all he troubled. If they had got into a mess, it was none of his concern. Eh? Broken arm—tied up? He couldn't—— Well, now he came to think of it—now they mentioned it—one of

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the two gents *had* had his coat-sleeve poked in his pocket. But no, he couldn't recollect whether—— The woman—her? No, she hadn't spoken, just stood and looked, all dolled up with a fur cloak tucked up round her face and ears. But she had dark hair, if that would——

Whether it would or whether it wouldn't neither Slade nor Brawley stopped to explain.

They returned to the car waiting outside in the roadway.

A couple of men were detailed to conduct the Ferret and his confederate along to the station, while the rest proceeded in the car. At the small church farther down the road the car pulled up, and Slade got out, to meet with another set-back. Paula Dane was nowhere to be seen. It was true that some time had elapsed since he had told her to wait for him, but she had given him her word. He called, and spent three or four minutes in running down several side-turnings.

With a dejected air he returned to his seat beside Brawley, and the car glided on. Brawley stopped at the first telephone-booth they passed and put through his two calls, the one to the Cottage Hospital and the other to the centre unit of his patrol.

After that Slade took the wheel, and no more was said until they were spinning along the road to Greystones.

Sir Royston had not retired for the night when the Flying Squad tender drew up in the dark drive outside the unlit house. The baronet himself, in smoking-jacket and slippers, answered Slade's ring.

His face lifted when he saw the detective, then fell again when he saw that he came unaccompanied by the woman who had been filling his thoughts for

hours on end. A wild hope had somehow or other sprung to life in his heart when he had remembered that Slade had promised to do his best. That hope died as he followed the glum-faced detective into the library.

Brawley, following both, closed the door.

The baronet, without another word spoken, slumped heavily into an armchair, his long fingers clawing at his knees.

Slade gazed round the now familiar room, and his eyes came to rest on the face of the little silver clock on the writing-bureau.

"I've come to offer you a share in an adventure, Sir Royston. I'm counting on your acceptance."

For several moments after the detective had spoken there was no response from the baronet. Then he raised his head, and his clouded eyes met the detective's.

"You're counting on me—counting on me!"

He spoke as one in a dream, repeating the words before he could understand what they meant.

"I am."

The ruffled hair was pushed back by a white hand.

"But—why?"

With an effort Slade forced some interest into his voice as he answered.

"Because I believe that to-night we're going to make a discovery."

He paused, watching the other intently. Then went on.

"A discovery which I believe will affect you—in more ways than one."

The low-spirited man was willing to grasp at the flimsiest hope.

"Paula—you will find her?"

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Anxious as he was, Slade's voice was almost cheery. Brawley stood well in the background, surprised, and not a little puzzled at his colleague's tactics.

"I know where she is. We're going to fetch her. You'll come, Sir Royston?"

The baronet was on his feet, eager.

"Come! Ha! ha! Come! Why——"

Slade gently but firmly pressed him back into his chair and stood over him.

"That's good, Sir Royston. I was counting on you, and I knew you wouldn't fail me. But you must be calm. There's a risk—a chance to be taken. We must be sure. It wouldn't be wise to get excited."

"Yes—yes! Of course! I'm quite calm—yes. But Paula——"

Slade guessed the trend of his thoughts, and broke in rudely. There was finality in his level tones.

"All in good time, Sir Royston. But first of all I want permission to search Richard Thorne's room——"

"Certainly, after we've——"

"No—now. I have a particular reason."

The baronet looked to Brawley, but the Flying Squad leader was staring at the carpet, apparently trying to make something of its design.

There was nothing else for it. Slade's face was inflexible. The baronet stifled his impatience as best he could, and passed to the door to lead the way.

The butler's room was on the same landing as the chauffeur's—in the west wing. Sir Royston, followed by the two detectives, paused a moment, then opened the door and switched on the light.

The three men entered.

The compartment was small, but comfortably and even tastefully furnished. In the far corner, under

the window, was a single bed. A table with a dark stuff cover stood in the centre of the room, and on it was a bowl of purple asters. Ranged along the wall facing the window was a shelf of books. Slade crossed to it, and stood, feet apart, running his eye over the titles. Mainly novels of the detective and 'thriller' type, he noted, with a sprinkling of War and Western stories.

Then his travelling gaze stopped. Wedged in between two red-covered cheap editions of a popular author of crime stories was a thin, grey-bound volume.

He pulled it out, opened it at the title-page, and put it back on the shelf. Two other volumes interested him to a similar extent.

When he faced round it was to find Brawley and the baronet eyeing him with different degrees of perplexity on their faces.

"Thorne must be a man of some queer tastes——"

Sir Royston interrupted a trifle testily.

"Our servants may have what choice in literature they like, Mr Slade——"

"Quite." Slade was even smiling serenely. "But it's rare that one comes across a butler with a knowledge of German which must be unique for one of his class."

"Still, I fail to see——"

"Yes?"—smoothly. "Well, we'll get a move on now."

The detective quite understood the baronet's feelings in the matter of Thorne's room, and took every precaution not to trample on them. The sanctity of the servant, and all that. Time, however, was urging.

After a few words to Brawley both men commenced a hurried but none the less thorough search of the room. Five minutes passed before Slade gave

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a little exclamation of triumph and dragged to light from beneath a loose board under the bed a rough canvas bag.

The bag was tied at the neck with coarse packing string, and as he lifted it to the table something inside chinked.

Brawley left his searching at the other side of the room, where he had been running through the contents of a promising-looking travelling-trunk, and crossed to the table.

Sir Royston stepped forward, curious now.

Brawley severed the string with his knife, and Slade dipped a hand inside.

He edged round the table, away from Sir Royston.

Then his eyes met Brawley's.

"The 'goods' we've heard so much about—some of 'em."

His teeth chewed at his under lip for a moment. He brought out his hand, filled with new, bright metal discs.

Some rolled out of his hand on to the table, wheeling in little circles, and chinking one against another.

Sir Royston came round to the other side of the table, his face blank with amazement.

"Why—why—money!" he gasped.

Brawley took a deep breath and avoided Slade's eyes.

"Not quite," said Slade, in an even voice, while Brawley laughed on an odd, jarring note. "But a damnably good imitation!"

The baronet stared, uncomprehending.

"Imitation—you mean——"

"That they're counterfeit!"

There followed a short silence, while Slade turned several of the coins over in his fingers, rubbing one

against the other, and Brawley cut and notched one with his knife.

Brawley closed his knife and put it back in his pocket.

"When did you guess?" he asked, his deep brown eyes following the movements of Slade's fingers.

"I had my suspicions just before we went to see the Chief Constable."

"You kept 'em pretty dark."

There was no reproach in his tone.

"It was best—I wasn't sure, old man. It was those filings we found at the farm that gave me the clue. But I wasn't at all certain until to-night. One of the gang said something about Manchester. I'd also got what Keith and the others had reported to go upon. That, added to the fact that the gang had something on their hands which they were mighty anxious to be rid of, gave me an inkling of the truth. We ought to make a scoop. It'll please the Chief."

"The Chief'll be pleased all right. But, anyway, it's hard to believe—like this."

"It would be—without this."

Slade pointed to the coins spread out on the table. He made a little pile of some.

Brawley shook his head.

"The scare's been raised. That Collins chap is fretting his heart about the Press notices in to-morrow's dailies. We've got our chance now to hand it all back with an interest at something like a hundred p.c. Say, Tony, I reckon I want a few minutes to realize it. It doesn't seem possible."

Slade laughed lightly, but his tone changed.

"You'll get used to it. But it's not this affair that's worrying me. I've got my own special job to finish—what I came down here for."

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He stopped.

Sir Royston had turned to the door. His face was pale, and one hand toyed with the piped lapel of his velvet smoking-jacket.

"I'll leave you now, gentlemen—to get ready. If there should be anything——"

He passed out without completing what he had been about to say.

As the door closed behind him Brawley faced round to Slade.

"Well, so the mysterious ogre of the small-change merchants is laid low—or is about to be. They must have made a pretty penny, though," he went on reflectively. "That North Midland Counties Bank affair was a cool ten or twelve thousand. Can't say but that we've been deucedly lucky. However—— Why, Tony, what the devil's the matter now?"

Slade had stepped across to the centre of the room with a low but audible sigh.

He faced the other.

"I'm in a funk, Abe."

"Never you believe it!"

Brawley laughed. The idea struck him as being original as well as comical.

"I am."

He stared at his colleague, his mouth falling.

"Well, you certainly look something of the sort, old chap. But all the same I don't believe you."

The bantering was well intentioned.

Slade grinned sheepishly.

"I'm honestly funkng what we're going to clear up. There's something that I can't get straightened out. Things don't fit in, Abe. Those letters of Sir Giles' I told you about, for one instance. Yes, I'm funkng things, old man."

“Eh?”

The smile had vanished from Brawley’s face.

Slade stepped back to the table with a weary air.

“Oh, I’m not thinking of us! We’re all right, as far as that goes. It’s—him!”

He nodded toward the door by way of explanation.

Brawley dug his hands in his pockets and looked up, frowning. He moved under the light.

“Sir Royston?”

Slade did not answer.

Brawley glanced at him keenly, his brown eyes narrowed, and the expression on his hawk-like face grew intense. Some loose coins in his pockets jingled.

“You mean——”

He stopped, not knowing quite how to put his thoughts.

Slade glanced round.

“Say it.”

“You mean his *fiancée*—an accident?”

Slade’s wide eyes stared at space. He laughed unpleasantly.

“No—I mean——”

The door opened, and Sir Royston stood before them in his leather motoring-coat.

Five minutes later two cars turned out of the Greystones drive into the main road.

CHAPTER XVII: *Behind the Mask*

DRAWN into the kerbside outside the closed Élite Garage was Brawley's first patrol.

The plain-clothes man who saluted his superior had some news to offer.

"We raided the place about midnight, sir. Absolutely nothing there except the plant. In case there should be an inquiry, I left things in order."

Slade and Brawley both stared at the closed gates of the garage. It was the former who put the question both were thinking.

"What about the office?"

"A simple job, Mr Slade. Just bundles of receipts and the ordinary files and accounts."

Brawley turned to Slade.

"Looks very much as though there's nothing else for it, Tony."

"There isn't," said Slade quietly, getting back into the Flying Squad car and seating himself at the wheel.

The cars moved on in single file, Slade leading, Sir Royston following close behind.

At the point beyond the second milestone where the brook ran under the road Brawley called a halt, and hasty counsel was taken. The last patrol should by now be waiting at the next by-road. The plan, as arranged, left no possible loophole for escape.

The raid on Rocks Dallow was commenced in grim silence. At the appointed meeting-place they found the other patrol awaiting them.

Yes, was the report, a large car had passed along that road some two hours earlier. The number, however, was SM 1063. The numbers of all the likely cars that had passed had been noted. The number of the large Daimler was not in the list.

Dawn was not far off when Slade silently ran his car to a halt some two hundred yards down the branch road leading toward Rocks Dallow. At alternate distances of twenty yards Sir Royston and one of the other Flying Squad tenders drew into the hedge-side and shut off their engines. The remaining patrol, with silencers on, crept forward at a snail's pace, the others following on foot.

The wind blew coldly across the open heathland to the north as Slade and four of Brawley's men unfastened the white gate marked "Private" and moved forward in a line toward the house.

Three minutes was the scheduled time for waiting. Two and a half had elapsed when Brawley and two more of the Flying Squad with Sir Royston joined them.

A final word about directions and signals, and Sir Royston and three of Brawley's men took up their stations along the front of the house at intervals of thirty feet.

Brawley and the others with him covered the sides of the house. The patrol that had moved farther down the road was left to cover the rear, while yet another two men remained with the cars.

Meantime Slade had found the large Daimler in the tumbledown garage, and had taken the precaution of piercing the tyres with Brawley's knife. Forty-five seconds, working by the light of his flash-lamp, was long enough to put the engine out of running order.

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That done, he made his way past Brawley, the last man on that side of the house, and round to the back garden.

His heart leapt as he caught a faint glimmer of light from a window above the ground floor, and cautiously he stepped through the clinging thorns and creepers to the window which had provided him with an entrance before.

Brawley's stout blade snapped short in the rusted lock, and for the moment Slade feared that the window was bolted on the inside. Patience and perseverance, however, served his turn, and the window opened suddenly, the large pane shivering under the impact.

Hurriedly he stepped inside.

By the aid of his flash-lamp he reached the hall and the foot of the stairs. There he hesitated, finally deciding to step back to the front door and unbolt it. Three times he flashed his torch—a signal.

As he turned to the staircase one of the men surrounding the house crept forward and stole up to the open door.

The last loop in the net was strung.

Slowly Slade mounted the stairs, taking every precaution against making a false step. The last flight he completed without using his torch, in case some one in the room above should suddenly open the door and discover the ray. Somewhere along the landing a window was open. He heard the flapping of the curtains, and now and then felt a breath of cool air upon his face and hands.

A few seconds later he rounded the landing, and saw on his right the soft grey patch which was the window. He stole by, looking for a narrow strip of yellow light on a level with the floor. The landing

was really more of a corridor, bending back toward one side of the house, and designed so that the rooms on one side faced from south to south-west, while those on the other faced more toward the east than the north. The plan was ingenious, but as Slade found, circling the wall farther from the window, it entailed a large waste of ground.

Then he saw what he was looking for—the thin streak of light on a level with the floor.

He drew back, listening, to hear only the soft sighing of the wind in the trees, and the still softer flapping of the curtain at the other end of the landing.

Noiselessly he moved to the door. It was ajar.

He thrilled as he caught a faint whiff of tobacco-smoke, sweet-smelling.

Why he lingered he did not know. A single move at that stage would finish the game.

Thank God that he had been right!

A clammy perspiration moistened his forehead and trickled into his eyes, as he realized for the first time what his long shot had meant. The time he had spent at Greystones collecting that last piece of evidence had placed the issue in the balance.

But he had been right! He had calculated that the woman, knowing that the patrol had been withdrawn, would make for Rocks Dallow and wait there until the coast was clear in the morning.

And she had!

The moment of nervous tension passed, leaving him his old self again, cool and collected, his lips lined in the merest of grim smiles.

He took a long silent breath, filling his lungs.

The woman was speaking.

“Have you nothing to say—Lionel?”

Silence.

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"Apparently not"—it was the woman speaking again. "You're not even—angry?"

Silence.

"You do not speak—ha! You're thinking of yourself. You're saying, 'I must find a way out—I must be rid of her.' Is it not so, my friend?"

The tone was lightly mocking.

"Still no word for me? Then let me interrupt that thought—let me shatter your fond dream." Her voice became low and passionate. Slade had to strain to catch the words. "Let me tell you now—there is no way out—none! Never will you be rid of me!"

"You do not make yourself clear."

Slade's eyes glistened as he recognized the voice. The butler's—Lionel Gillespie's!

"No?" Again the low mocking was in the voice. "Then you must interpret it how you will. Call it Fate." The voice changed. "You crossed my path—you made me suffer. Once—yes, once I loved you. For your sake, because you asked it of me, I lost caste—became virtually your tool. And as such you treated me. But there is no need to raise dead ashes. You forgot me. That love which was once yours lived long enough to turn into hate. You hear? I hate you. Yet one word from you, and—— But no! You are silent. And because in silence hate finds a nourishment—I have betrayed you. You will hang for the murder of your brother. Tell me, is that not in keeping? The purchase and the price?"

Silence.

"You betrayed me. You have told the police that I killed my brother. This, then, is your revenge?"

"Ah—my—revengel!"

She dwelt on the words as though something in their sound pleased her.

"After attempting in vain to blackmail my brother."

Slade felt the sneer in the words, and tried to visualize the expression on the woman's face.

"You—know—that!"

There was a keener, sharper note in her voice.

"I know—all."

What made him think it Slade did not know, but at those words he had a sudden feeling that one of those two, either the man or the woman, was at cross-purposes with the other. Perhaps both.

Like a rapier-thrust came her parry.

"Then you must know how much I hate!"

The man laughed brokenly.

"I remain impervious!"

"You remain yet to be sorry!"

The pause that followed upon this was an uncomfortable one. Slade felt keenly the bitter irony of the situation—a crisis within a crisis.

"Did you bring me here to tell me that?"

"No. I brought you here to watch you suffer. You are a coward by nature. I want to see you cringe."

Silence.

"Perhaps you'll be disappointed."

"A risk—but I'm willing to run it."

"You have nothing at stake?"

"Not now. You changed my life, and with it you changed me. You made me a gambler like yourself. I spent what was left of me in pitting my wits against those of others. I was even beginning to find a certain enjoyment—till you again crossed my way. Since then things have changed again. I was a happy criminal"—bitterly. "Now I am happy to lose—knowing that you will lose. I too am impervious!"

Slade moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

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"You say that you brought me here to watch me suffer—to see me cringe. Tell me, did you bring me here to lose your own game? Or because it was your last chance left of winning?"

The shrewdness of the words sounded cruel.

"Ha!"—the woman's tones faltered—"you bargain!"

"No—nor cringe!"

Silence.

After what seemed to Slade an extra long pause:

"You're hoping for a way out—yes?"

The man took his time in replying.

"What are my hopes against your hate?"

"That remains to be seen. But—you hope?"

"I hope."

"Life is sweet—eh?"

"Life is"—a pause—"pleasant."

The difference struck Slade oddly. Again he was aware of that feeling of cross-purposes being at play.

"And the bargain?"

"Is for you to—er—propose."

Slade heard the sound of some one rising and a chair being drawn back. One or the other, he supposed, remained seated.

When the woman spoke again Slade's hand was on the door-handle.

"Our chance is——"

"Gone!"

His back to the door, Slade was covering both with his gun.

The woman stifled a cry with the back of her hand, and reached out to the table for support. The other occupant of the room, the butler, rose slowly to his feet. In his hazel eyes was a flicker of humour almost whimsical.

"This is hardly opportune, Mr Slade."

"Perhaps," answered Slade wryly; "but there are times when one can neither pick nor choose."

His eyes travelled to the woman.

Unmasked, her pale face, coldly beautiful in a striking way, was as moulded in blue-veined marble. Her dark eyes glowed hotly, and her bosom rose and fell heavily. The bright colour of her lips lay like a red smear across the whiteness of her face.

"Allow me"—Slade tossed a piece of black velvet on to the table in front of her—"Mademoiselle Dolziev!"

She started, and shrank back as from the stroke of a lash, staring at the little black velvet mask with horror-stricken eyes.

Slade explained crisply.

"I found it on the floor beside Mick. The game is played. The principals—to quote—meet for the last time!"

He smelt the strong perfume of lilac as she raised a little square of lace-edged cambric to her mouth.

Slade saw her eyes glance under their long lashes at the man, and the detective edged away from the door.

"Wenn ich 'springe' sage—springen Sie ihm auf den Arm!"

Slade's mouth tightened. He raised his left hand to his lips and blew two sharp blasts on his whistle.

"Springe!"

The butler remained stockstill, and the woman span round on her heel with a short exclamation.

"Feigling!"

She stopped, gazing at the bewildered face of the man. Slade saw the panic that leapt to her eyes.

"You—you're not Lionel Gillespie!" She flung

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the accusation, and tottered backward. "Who—who are you?"

Slade stood rigid, backed against the wall.

The door burst open, and Jerry, his bandaged arm slung in a scarf, fell into the room. In his left hand was a revolver. He cleared the doorway and twisted round. Some one else entered. Jerry raised his sound arm. Just as the bullet smashed the electric-light bulb to a thousand splinters, an instant before the room was plunged in darkness, Slade saw the butler spring forward.

Then darkness, the sound of scurrying feet outside on the landing, and the savage barking of revolvers.

Slade jerked his trigger, aiming low, and heard an answering bullet slug the wall behind his head, on a level with his mouth. He dropped to his knee, and fired twice rapidly.

Some one else from the doorway was firing—blindly.

There was a sharp cry of pain, a chair crashed over—and then a sudden silence. A ray of light shone through the open door, and Brawley's deep voice called out.

Slade answered.

A few seconds later one of the Flying Squad men had fetched a new globe from an adjoining room, and once more the room was illuminated.

On the floor against the table lay the butler, his eyes staring at Sir Royston. In one corner was the last unit of the gang, Jerry, held captive by two of Brawley's men. Crouching over the butler was the woman, her cheek bleeding freely from a flesh wound. She was staring at the stricken man's face with wild, pain-stricken eyes.

As light flooded the room Slade placed a hand on her shoulder, but she did not heed him.

"Who are you? Who are you?" she was repeating, in a low, half-chanting voice. "I know now—you are not Lionel Gillespie. No! Who are you? Who are you?"

Slade forced her into a chair.

Another of Brawley's men entered the room, escorting Paula Dane, wide-eyed and pale.

The butler's glassy eyes watched Sir Royston move to her and take her in his arms, saw him kiss her fondly, her hair and her neck.

The woman was on her feet again, confronting Slade. There was pain in her fine eyes.

"You know all! You have done this—you that I warned. I said you would come back. You remember? You know—something is telling me that you know! Who is he?"

All in the room were listening. The eyes of all were focused on Slade and the woman standing by him. All save the butler's, whose eyes had not left Sir Royston and the woman in his arms.

Slade stood motionless.

Then Paula Dane stepped forward, a bright spot staining each cheek.

"What does she mean? What do you know, Mr Slade?"

Her soft, liquid eyes were appealing. Slade stared past her.

"He knows all!" wailed on the woman.

Paula Dane's eyes misted. She stood as if rooted.

"She means—you know who murdered Sir Giles?"

Slade's eyes dropped, and he glanced aside at Sir Royston's pale, excited face.

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"Sir Giles was not murdered!"

The announcement was accompanied by a stony silence. Then Roy Gillespie started forward.

"Not——!"

He pulled up short.

The moment Slade had been fearing had arrived. He braced himself to meet it.

"Mr Gillespie, you'd better——"

"Mister!"

Paula Dane's eyes had cleared, were searching the detective's face.

"Mister! Then—you mean—Sir Giles——"

Slade looked away. At that moment he would have given anything rather than have to stand there and face the young man and his *fiancée*.

Roy Gillespie came closer, and from the other side of the room Brawley moved forward.

"My father—he is——"

Slade bowed his head.

"He is alive!" he said quietly, and turned away.

The young man seized him roughly by the arm and swung him round face to face.

"I remember!" he breathed. "You said there were things which would affect me—in more ways than one. What is it? Tell me, Mr Slade! For God's sake—quick!"

For one long moment Slade remained mute. Then his eyes met those of the butler.

He pointed.

"Mr Gillespie, your father needs you. And you, Miss Dane."

The words seemed to echo in the silence that followed their utterance. Like a man shaking off the evil effects of a bad dream, Roy Gillespie staggered across the room and knelt by the wounded man's side.

The eyes of the two men met.

"Father!"

"My—my—boy!" trembled the pale lips.

"Father!"

The bloodless lips smiled wanly.

Slade moved slowly to the young man's side, and, bending low, gently daubed the pallid face with his handkerchief. Then, carefully, he removed the false moustache from Sir Giles Gillespie's upper lip.

The detective rose and stepped back, making way for Paula Dane. Too late he turned to see the other woman fumbling with her handbag.

"Stop her!" he shouted, and sprang forward.

But the little green phial was already between her teeth—emptied.

Little bits of glass splinters glittered on her lips.

Brawley caught her as she fell, his arm supporting her as she reeled sideways. One of her hands was pointing at Slade.

"He knows! He knows!" she murmured.

And her eyes closed.

CHAPTER XVIII: *Slade Completes his Report*

As Big Ben chimed the first quarter after two Slade put down the couple of typewritten dockets, one a memorandum with clipped edges and a pasted photograph of a man, the other an official file reference headed "ATR. 4M. viii."

He glanced at his watch, held it for a moment to his ear, and then shook open the folded newspaper on the table with the air of a man who is about to read something with a relish. After lighting his pipe he settled back in his chair with his back to the window, drawing slowly.

The *Morning Mirror* had brought off a *coup*, and their special correspondent, one Mr Cholmondeley Wettermack, whose sonorous name sounded not unfamiliar to Slade, headed his three-column report with the large-type and alluring heading—"Signal Failure of Police in Provincial Murder Mystery."

Half-way down the first column was the black-lettered paragraph-heading, "Flying Squad Outmanœuvred!"

Slade smiled. Then commenced his attack.

Twenty minutes later he was going over it again, inking certain paragraphs and underlining certain sentences. He refolded the paper. On the first of the centre picture pages was reproduced a photograph of a window of the Sudley Abbott Cottage Hospital. Immediately underneath was another photographic reproduction, with a lengthy caption below, explain-

ing that the above scene showed the remains of an untenanted farmhouse near Sudley Abbott after the occurrence of a mysterious explosion, which, up to the present, the police could not account for.

As he screwed on the top of his pen Slade was roused by a sharp ring from the near-by 'phone.

He picked up the receiver.

"Hullo! Yes. Certainly, Chief, at once. Yes. Yes—quite. The memoranda? I have them here. Yes. Now, sir."

He rang off.

With the suspicion of a smile he rose, refolded the marked newspaper, and put it in his pocket. Then he picked up the two dockets he had been studying, and left the room.

In answer to his tap on a door along a neighbouring corridor, marked "Strictly Private," a low voice called:

"Come in!"

He entered, saluted, and was motioned to take a chair before the long, work-piled desk.

"Well, Mr Slade, I've been through the rest of your report, and—frankly—I'm curious."

Slade allowed his mouth to twitch.

"A puzzling case, sir, and an involved one. Yet understandable."

"Ah!" The Chief folded his arms and rested them on the sloping writing-block. "I think I know what you mean. Yes—understandable. Well, so much the better."

Slade sat forward. The Chief tapped a bundle of papers on the desk.

"You were able to clear up several points before Sir Giles Gillespie died. He was conscious for some while, I understand."

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"Yes, sir. Of course, he sank fast on being moved, and it was quite a while before the ambulance arrived. The bullet had severed something in his stomach. The case was urgent. Morphia was injected, but in the circumstances it was of little use. Nothing the surgeon could do was able to make up for the time that had been lost. His collapse when they got him to the hospital was complete. He never really recovered consciousness after that."

The swing-chair in which the Chief was seated creaked.

"And this woman Dolziev? You don't say what she swallowed."

"No, sir. A solution of potassium cyanide was suggested. But the tests hadn't been completed when I left."

The Chief frowned thoughtfully at his desk, then looked up quickly.

"I see. Now, I want you to run over the missing points in the case. I realize that the coining affair must overlap in places, the woman Dolziev being involved with Gillespie, but that can't be helped. Keep as close to the Gillespie business as you can. We can leave the finish of the gang to Brawley and the Squads. Superintendent Keith and Northern headquarters have been notified. Light your pipe and go ahead."

Slade relighted his pipe, and began his narration without more ado.

"What Sir Giles told me of the family history merely corroborated what I'd already heard from Dr Bruce. You've had a summary of that, sir."

The Chief nodded and Slade continued.

"As far as I can make out, sir, Sir Giles believed his brother Lionel dead when Leatrice Gillespie

Slade Completes his Report

returned to England with her baby daughter, Paula. The report was that Lionel Gillespie had been killed in a gambling brawl in Rome, but in actual fact he had been saved. Some woman who was attached to him nursed him back to life. It seems Gillespie could exercise a strange fascination over the wrong kind of woman. Just as soon as he recovered he quite callously deserted the woman who had saved his life, and he bolted to Paris. He came under the notice of the Paris police soon after that, and from then on we have a fairly accurate idea of his activities. He spoke German fluently, and being on the rocks financially he accepted an offer from the German Secret Service. He became a spy.

"This was in nineteen-thirteen. At this time he fell in with Aimée Dolziev. She was a singer and dancer then appearing in Berlin. The woman, like many another, felt the strange charm he could exercise and readily lent herself as a link in an organization for passing official information from England here to Germany. It happened, however, that our own people had an eye on them both, and their movements in nineteen-fourteen and the early months of 'fifteen were known. In March 'fifteen some documents he was handling miscarried, and he panicked.

"It was then that he applied to his brother for help."

The Chief was fondling his chin.

"And the woman?" he asked.

Slade loosened the tobacco in his pipe.

"He treated her as he treated the others—threw her over to save his own hide. It looks as if she woke up to the truth then. At any rate, she stopped working for the Germans. Our people could have lifted

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her, of course, but they left her alone to see if she would put them on the track of other agents. You know the idea, sir."

"Of course. Go on, Slade."

"You'll imagine how Sir Giles, confronted by this brother in the flesh—a renegade wanted by the authorities—found himself fixed. Lionel, you see, had found that his daughter, Paula Dane, was alive, and he was rogue enough to make a weapon of the fact. He threatened to disclose himself to her."

"Ah!"

"There was a bitter scene between the brothers, and in the end Sir Giles, who all but worshipped his ward, did for her sake what he wouldn't have done for his own, or even for the honour of the family. He concocted the plan whereby Lionel was to become Richard Thorne, a soldier who had been invalided out with gas-poisoning and whom he had taken as his butler.

"There was no need for any very elaborate disguise on the part of Lionel. He had not been home for years. His daughter had not seen him since infancy, and young Royston never at all. Sir Giles had not cultivated county Society—his activities had been in the City, remember—so that nobody likely to remember Lionel was in the habit of coming to Greystones. It didn't matter that there was a strong family likeness between the two men. Temperamentally they were Poles apart. The garb of the butler, the moustache, and the hair which Lionel grew down the sides of his face completed the disguise. It was simple, but effective. Then Lionel Gillespie, from the life he had led, was a pastmaster at acting. You know, Chief, as well as I do, that the best sort of make-up is in manner."

The Chief nodded agreement.

"Of course it is rather marvellous that the pretence lasted so long, but on both sides there was every motive for keeping it up successfully. Lionel was in danger not only from the British authorities, but from Germany. The Germans wanted him because they thought he had betrayed them, and we may be sure that he knew they wanted him. Sir Giles——"

"Let us take Sir Giles' motives for granted, Slade," the Chief interrupted. "They were strong enough, God knows—poor harassed devil! What of this woman—this Aimée Dolziev?"

Slade relit his pipe before answering.

"This is where the Gillespie case and the coining affair begin to overlap, Chief," he said. "If you don't mind, sir, I'll get the woman and her gang off my chest first."

"Do, by all means, Slade," the Chief smiled. "Don't be afraid of being prolix."

"Thank you, sir! Do you happen to remember Waldostein?"

The Chief knitted his brows, and his pale-coloured eyes turned an interested gaze on his subordinate.

"Waldostein?" he replied. "You mean the fellow who brought coining to such a fine art, and who got clear to Chicago?"

"That's the fellow, sir. Stamped his stuff from good dies instead of moulding it, and turned out a milled edge too. Well, if the chap we caught at Westminster is to be believed, it was from Waldostein himself that the woman got her ideas."

The Chief shook his head dubiously.

"I'm afraid, Slade——"

Slade took a coin from his pocket and handed it to the Chief without a word. The Chief peered at it

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eagerly, and rubbed it tenderly between finger and thumb. There was a glint in his eyes as he looked up at Slade.

"Marvellous, Slade!" he admitted. "Marvellous!"

"Snide all the same, sir. It has the true Waldostein touch. That came from Lionel Gillespie's room at Greystones. Then there's this to connect up with Waldostein. You remember when Waldostein and the others got clear how it was a woman that helped them—a woman that could act like Duse herself? I can tell you frankly, sir, that I've never seen a better actress on or off the stage than Aimée Dolziev. What's more, sir, Waldostein's a Pole. So was Aimée Dolziev. I hazard a guess that there's a link with the Friends of Poland affair."

For a second or two the Chief stared at him searchingly, then took up a pencil and fell to writing rapidly on a pad. He tore off the sheet and put it under a paper-weight.

"That is very interesting, Slade. Pray go on!"

"We don't know yet how long it took her to get the gang into working order, but she must have been a born leader and a wizard at organization. There were two main agencies, north and south. From the dates we have, they must have worked alternately. The actual plant was at Jallop's Farm, though it was shifted just before the raid to Cordwayne Terrace. Collins found it in the basement there. Rocks Dallow was a reserve base. Then there was the Élite Garage. That was largely a blind, a place from which to spy on the police, and a sort of telephone exchange. The whole thing was a masterpiece of efficiency—but for one weak cog in the machine."

"The man Mazer?"

"Yes, sir. Mazer, the professional squealer. You know what Mazer did, and what use Brawley made of his letter. Still, I don't think we'd have got on to the gang so quickly if Dolziev hadn't got herself mixed up with the Gillespie affair. And she wouldn't have got mixed up with the Gillespie affair—there would have been no Gillespie affair—if Lionel Gillespie hadn't put himself in her way.

"Lionel Gillespie hadn't lost his taste for queer company. He used to visit a disreputable public-house in the town called the Cricketers' Arms. It was there that he fell in with a member of the gang called Jerry Kirsch—an old lag. Jerry Kirsch introduced Gillespie—under the name of Richard Thorne, of course—to the gang, and Lionel was given some smuggling of the coins to do. I can't be sure when Dolziev discovered who Thorne really was, but I do know that she first began to wear the velvet mask when he was brought to the house in Cordwayne Terrace. It looks as if she knew him from the first."

"And knowing him to be Lionel Gillespie, connected him with the Sir Giles Gillespie to whom he was supposed to be butler?"

"I suppose so, sir," Slade replied. "At any rate, she conceived the idea of turning the Gillespie secret to her own advantage, and started blackmailing Sir Giles. That, of course, set the brothers against each other—with the tragic result that took me down to Greystones."

"They quarrelled, you think?" the Chief asked.

"I imagine there was a series of quarrels," Slade nodded. "The blackmailing letters were becoming more and more insistent in tone, more dangerous. There had to be replies. And that compromised Sir

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Giles. Sir Giles saw but one way out of it all. Lionel had to be got rid of. He was the cause of all the trouble. Sir Giles realized that his brother would have to be eliminated in some way that wouldn't jeopardize Miss Dane—or his own son.

"It was on the day when he received a last letter, saying that the woman herself would visit him in a week's time, that the idea came to him. It meant the sacrifice, but he counted that little. He'd murder his brother—and take his place. But he'd arrange the murder as a suicide of himself!"

"Which explains the most puzzling item of all—eh?"

"Precisely, Chief—those letters."

"Yes—that was an ingenious move."

"It was. Afterwards, he thought, he'd have plenty of time to deal with the woman. With this plan to be worked out, he kept mainly to himself for that week, letting the hair down the sides of his face grow. A moustache was out of the question—it would have set the servants talking. So when the time drew near he bought a false one. On the afternoon before the visitor was due he wrote those letters and posted them. Then he returned home to wait."

"Suppose the visitor had not arrived?"

"That would not have affected his arrangements in any way, which were planned for afterwards."

"Quite!"—crisply.

"Of course, with her mask off, Lionel Gillespie recognized her, as she meant him to. When she'd gone the pretence was over. He went back to the library—to threaten. He smoked two cigarettes. The others had been smoked by the woman."

"But those cigarettes and the magazine you found in the bureau, weren't they hers?"

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"Yes. I have an idea she left them as a reminder of herself. She was a strange creature, and to do that would be like her. She didn't count on murder."

The Chief leaned back on his elbows, his chin sunk low.

Slade wiped his mouth with his handkerchief.

"Sir Giles murdered his brother by getting behind him and suddenly grasping him round the throat and strangling him. Then he shaved him, managing to cut his lip. After that he changed clothes, but in the hurry of the moment forgot to change the socks to the right side out. To keep up the pretence, and to give the police something to go on, he almost emptied the whisky decanter in the bushes below the terrace, and smashed a glass on the terrace itself. When that was done he dragged the body on to the terrace, incidentally scoring the floor with the dead man's heels, and—and left it in the position in which Inspector Collins and Dr Bruce found it the next morning. There's one point of interest. When he arranged the staging he wore gloves."

Slade paused, but beyond nodding the Chief made no comment. Slade went on:

"After leaving the body on the terrace Sir Giles arranged matters in the library as he wished them to be found. The strangling had served his purpose as being noiseless, while at the same time leaving no blood-traces. He was extraordinarily thorough—even to the minutest details."

"You mean the pumiced fingers?"

As he spoke the Chief was staring vacantly out of the window.

"Yes, as an instance. You see, he himself invariably smoked a pipe, and his hands were unstained. His brother, on the other hand, smoked cigarettes,

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and the inside of the thumb and first two fingers of his right hand were stained a deep yellow-brown."

Again the Chief shuffled a pile of papers.

"Sir Giles' actions in relation to the gang—after the murder—how do you account for them?"

Slade considered this point.

"He was acting for the most part in the dark, I think. His brother most likely had told him a little. On the morning when I found him at the Élite Garage I expect he was obeying an order from the gang. Aimée Dolziev probably. He must have learnt more from that fellow Mick when the latter trailed me to Greystones—the day when I found him spying at the window of the room where the body was lying. Sir Giles was entirely ignorant, however, of how far his brother had complicated himself with the gang. He didn't know of the bag of coins hidden in his room. And when he tricked the Ferret and got to the house in Cordwayne Terrace he was relying upon what he had been told and what he had picked up. His object was simply to rescue Miss Dane."

"And his bluff was successful—as far as the other woman was concerned?"

"Perfectly. It wasn't until he failed to understand German that she tumbled to the truth. At least, that he wasn't Lionel Gillespie. She believed that she'd told me the truth."

The Chief smoothed his hand over the writing-block.

"But for yourself, didn't you suspect him of not being Richard Thorne?"

"I did—and I didn't." Slade spoke slowly, considering his words. "There was something about him which I felt didn't quite tally with the reports I'd heard about him. People didn't give Richard

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Thorne a very good character. This man seemed to have deeps of decency about him. He was not of the servant class. I got an odd impression that he was spiritually uplifted. But it was the chance mistake about March nineteen-fifteen that first set me puzzling over him."

"The servants, then, suspected nothing?"

"Nothing."

The Chief rose and walked to the window. For several moments he stood there looking out. At last he turned round and faced Slade.

"When did you yourself first suspect the truth, Slade?"

Slade too rose. His face was thoughtful. It was a question he had been puzzling out as he had journeyed up in the train that morning.

"I was puzzled all along. I knew that those letters were not forged—and at the same time I knew that the man on the terrace had been murdered—strangled. That meant that the suicide at any rate was a fake. But the letters couldn't be got past. The evidence contradicted itself; there was a flaw somewhere. Later I knew that Aimée Dolziev was speaking the truth—or thought she was. And I knew that the butler had lied—because he'd never been gassed. Gradually I came to see that Sir Giles had been concerned in something not quite above-board—although I didn't guess what. All the evidence was misleading—in fact, it led nowhere. And Inspector Collins' young bombshell about the false moustache didn't help any. I don't think I suspected anything like the real truth until I stood outside that room at Rocks Dallow—this morning."

He paused, and the Chief took a turn up the room.

"What about this fellow Mick?"

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"A knife-wound in his side. But the surgeon holds out hope. It wasn't as bad as I feared at first."

Long grey shadows were streaking across the room. Outside Big Ben chimed, and then tolled the hour—five o'clock.

The Chief came back to the desk, switched on the desk-lamp, and drew it toward him.

"Sit down, Slade," he said gravely. "There's still one point. It concerns something that happened on the night of the murder."

Slade took a deep breath.

"You refer, Chief, to Sir Royston—and Miss Dane?"

"I do. You have an explanation?"

Their eyes met across the desk.

Briefly Slade explained what Sir Royston had told him concerning the meeting with Paula Dane in the grounds. The Chief listened in silence, and when Slade had finished referred back to the written sheets before him.

"Dr Bruce's report says the actual time of the murder must have been about a quarter-past eleven. Now, the library window opens on the terrace that faces the lawn. In the centre of this lawn is the large chestnut-tree. Sir Royston tells us himself that he was at the tree that same night some minutes before half-past eleven. It seems impossible that he should have seen nothing of the tragedy."

The Chief's pale eyes, almost colourless in the yellow glare of the electric light, regarded the detective opposite fixedly.

Slade returned his superior's glance without flinching.

"I am hoping, sir," he said frankly, "that after the painful scenes of this morning there will be no

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need to drag Sir Royston or Miss Dane into a useless official inquiry. In spite of being under suspicion, locally, Sir Royston made himself very useful. From the first, except for some very excusable reticence, he has been quite frank and open. He and Miss Dane became engaged that night, and——”

“And you wish me to see that they are spared further pain, Slade. Is that it?”

“If possible, sir,” Slade pleaded.

The Chief smiled suddenly.

“You’re a good fellow, Slade,” he said. “As far as we are concerned there will be no further trouble for Sir Royston and his *fiancée*. Of course, I cannot answer for any investigation that may be made locally.”

Slade’s grin betrayed serenity with regard to anything the redoubtable Collins might do.

“Thank you, sir!” he said warmly.

He rose to his feet.

“As a matter of fact, Chief,” he said, “when Sir Royston crossed the lawn from the drive toward the tree he did see a light in the library. He even remembers seeing a figure walking on the terrace. But he didn’t want to be discovered by his father. He hung back until the figure had gone in and the library light had been put out. He knew, of course, that Sir Giles usually retired about eleven. Thus, in a way, he was a witness, but his evidence could prove nothing.”

“Miss Dane joined him after the half-hour?”

“Yes. She had to get out of the house by way of the servants’ corridor, and that delayed her by several minutes.”

“She heard no sounds proceeding from the library—saw nothing?”

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"No. The servants' wing is at the other side of the house. She left the door ajar, and returned that way."

The Chief nodded several times, and then pushed his chair back.

"Thank you very much, Mr Slade. You've put the matter very clearly. I—— Come in!"

A constable entered, saluted smartly, and handed the Chief a telegram. The latter tore open the reddish-brown envelope and hastily scanned the few lines.

"That will do, Smith."

The man saluted again and closed the door after him. The Chief rose and passed the telegram to Slade.

It ran:

Supt. Keith notified ten stop squads out stop report four arrests stop more later stop B.

Slade handed the slip back with a little grin.

The Chief took it and ejaculated:

"Brawley has wasted no time! Smart work!"

Slade placed the typewritten dockets he had previously found interesting on a cleared corner of the desk, also the folded newspaper.

He took a couple of steps in the direction of the window.

"The memoranda, Chief, and the newspaper that I mentioned this morning—marked."

The Chief nodded shortly.

"That was smart of Brawley——"

Slade had taken another sheet of paper from his pocket. He handed it to him.

The Chief stopped short, took the paper, glanced at it, then at Slade.

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"A copied list of agencies—with addresses appended! Where did you get it?"

Slade stared at the carpet, smiling to himself.

He heard the Chief catch his breath.

"In the recess behind the mantelshelf at Jallop's Farm. I snatched it as I jumped down to the floor."

"Jallop's Farm?"

"When I saw the time-bomb."

The Chief took another long breath, and smiled as though amused at something which had just crossed his mind.

"And you gave Brawley a copy before you left—this morning?"

Slade's eyes were still on the carpet.

"Yes, sir."

When the detective looked up the Chief was holding out his hand.

"Then there's nothing for me to do but to pass the compliment on—eh?"

CHAPTER XIX: *Slade Wears a White Buttonhole*

IT was a gusty day in early December when Anthony Slade next stood before the grate in the library at Greystones. The autumn leaves had ceased to litter the gravel paths of the fine old house, and outside a drift of clean, fresh snow lay like a spotless carpet across the lawn. The single chestnut-tree in the centre stood limned in white. Soft, feathery flakes smeared the window-panes.

A wood-fire crackled merrily in the grate, and the heavy aroma of expensive cigars filled the air.

Dr Bruce, smug in a luxurious armchair, flicked his ash into a tray on his chair-arm, and blew a mushroom of smoke.

Then he took another contented puff, and regarded the glowing end of his weed with the satisfaction of a man who has little fault to find with life.

He stirred himself in the depths of the chair.

"I shall see my fifty-sixth birthday this Christmas, Mr Slade," he announced impressively, "—and still a bachelor, sir. Thank God! Yes, thank God!"

He sucked at the cigar, rolling it between his finger and thumb. Then he waved it to and fro under his nose.

Slade faced round, and took his own cigar from the corner of his mouth.

He stood with his back to the fire, the flickering flames throwing pretty shadows about his feet.

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"Allow me, then, to offer my congratulations—a little in advance."

The Doctor was in that happy mood when a man is pleased to misinterpret through sheer vanity and good-feeling.

"You may well, Mr Slade. Fifty-six—and my own master still. It's a record. Fifty-six and uncorrupted, with my household my own stronghold; it's good—it's good. Four more years—and sixty. Steady-going, and in ten more I shall be unanimously elected to take a place in the coveted ranks of my country's immortals—the Grand Old Celibate!"

The Doctor shook his head waggishly.

Slade laughed softly. His cigar was one of Sir Royston's best, and it was the sort of weather he preferred. Old English, to his mind. He turned round, and the warm light of the fire melted in his keen eyes.

"Strange sentiments, Doctor, for one who a couple of hours ago was a baronet's best man."

There was a suspicion of genial raillery in his low voice.

Dr Bruce sighed, and exhaled another cloud of aromatic smoke.

"Noblesse oblige!"

Slade chuckled.

"Thanks—if I'm included."

"Oh, you are, Mr Slade—you are! Do you know," went on the Doctor, in a different tone, confidential to a degree, "only last night I was thinking of you."

"Before turning in, I hope," said Slade, with mock gravity. "People don't generally remember me—pleasantly."

"It was before turning in, I admit. And it wasn't altogether pleasantly—as you put it."

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"Oh!"

The syllable was long-drawn-out.

"But neither was it altogether—unpleasantly. I was puzzled. To be perfectly frank, I was thinking of an occasion which didn't prove as agreeable as the present."

The firelight played uncanny tricks with Slade's averted face. With his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, and his feet spread wide in front of the hearth, his square shoulders appeared to stoop more than usual.

"You were thinking of a couple of months ago?"—quietly.

The words were spoken more to the cluster of sparks that hurled upward through the smoke-puffs toward the chimney than to the Doctor.

"I was"—reflectively. "I chanced to rake out an old newspaper, which brought it back to my mind."

A cloud of cigar-smoke screened the Doctor's face.

The resinous log which had given forth the sparks broke with a crackling splutter, and the red glow in the heart of the fire deepened.

"One of the Press announcements?"

"Yes—a local paper, the *Sudley Herald*. Collins didn't show up very well. Scotland Yard was mentioned, but such credit as there was went to the Chief Constable, Sir George Simpson-Harding."

For a few moments the silence in the room was broken only by the crackle of the fire and the low moaning of the wind outside.

Slade considered something of an explanation.

"You see, Doctor, from policy the Yard wanted no more to leak out than was absolutely necessary. I think at the time I explained the two issues involved?"

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Dr Bruce looked at him searchingly.

"You mean Sir Giles and that gang? You were pretty close over that. I don't think Collins or the Chief Constable himself know more than a fraction of what you know."

Slade smiled enigmatically.

"From the question of results the Yard would naturally be more interested in the one case than the other. The gang was a menace to the community at large. Sir Giles to himself. It was mere chance that the Yard was brought into his case. Normally it was one for the local police."

"Sir Giles' letter created the chance?"

The question was in the tone more than the words.

Slade shifted his feet and took his hands from his pockets.

"That letter was the most ingenious move he made—and the most fatal. But for that letter the Yard wouldn't have taken the matter in hand. There would have been an ugly and suspended court case, with Sir Royston under arrest. For Collins was obtuse, relying upon circumstantial evidence against Sir Royston. Motive, if far to seek, wouldn't have been hard to manufacture. Collins is a thorough worker, but if the Yard hadn't come in . . ."

"The truth of the matter would not have been unearthed!"

Slade took the cigar from the corner of his mouth, and shook his head slowly, his lips compressed.

"Although I didn't act alone, modesty moves me to contradict you, Doctor. You know, strange things happen at strange times."

There was a queer smile playing round Slade's mouth.

The Doctor regarded the detective quizzically.

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"What exactly d'you mean by that, Mr Slade? Putting aside the part you filled in the programme—about which I've my own opinions"—significantly—"what precise nail are you trying to hit on the head?"

Slade laughed shortly, and watched the blaze at his feet with earnest eyes.

"You forget, Doctor—as the Press forgot—that Sir Giles' idea was to stage a suicide."

"Well? As a matter of fact, I haven't forgotten it—but let that pass."

"A suicide," repeated the detective, with emphasis. "He meant that everybody, including the police, should believe he had done away with himself."

"One would suppose as much"—a trifle severely.

"There's no fuss, no court scenes, no lawyers and all that, with a suicide. Motive and result are inextricably tied up. A notice in a daily paper, and it's finished and done with. Simple, isn't it?"

"It would be, if I saw what you were driving at," growled the other, with mock asperity.

Slade puffed at his cigar.

"It *is* simple. A suicide—that is what he planned. But the plan went wrong."

"I could have guessed that!"

The twinkle in the Doctor's pale eyes robbed the words of their edge.

"Now, suppose that Sir Royston was in the dock on a charge of murdering his father."

"Yes." The Doctor was sitting up and taking notice. He evidently expected something.

"And suppose that Sir Giles waited until a verdict of guilty was brought in."

"Waited? I don't quite——"

Dr Bruce's mouth crinkled in his endeavour to gather the trend of the detective's argument.

"Of course!"—triumphantly. "You *ought* to see! Do you suppose that he would have let his son be hung for his murder—when he was still alive?"

There was a second's odd silence.

"By Jove, of course not!" Genuine amazement filled the Doctor's voice. He looked at Slade blankly, his pale eyes washed of colour in the dancing firelight. "No man would! His son! I never thought of that! Why, no—of course he wouldn't!"

Slade's shoulders lifted, and he stood back from the fire.

Suddenly he turned round, flicking the ash from his cigar into the grate.

"There was something that puzzled you, Doctor?"

"Ah—yes! Er—it was that letter to the Yard, Mr Slade. Or rather the certificate included with it. I suppose it was in order?"

An inscrutable little smile played about Slade's firmly lined mouth.

"That's a pretty cute question, Doctor. May I ask what made you put it?"

Dr Bruce puffed quickly at his cigar, but it had gone out.

"Oh—I—I just thought it would be—er—interesting, you know," he said lamely, striking at a match with fumbling fingers.

Slade's hands clasped behind his back, and he rocked slowly from toe to heel.

"What made you think that?"

The other raised his eyes, and quickly dropped them.

"Just a—a fancy of my own."

Slade stepped to the bookcase to the left of the window, chose a volume from a shelf half-way down,

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and came back with it. He handed the book to the Doctor.

"Had your fancy anything to do with this very interesting book, Doctor—chapter twelve, shall we say?"

The Doctor looked at the title on the cover, and put the book down. He stared at the detective, at a loss for words, his cigar in imminent peril of smouldering out again.

"So you know about that too?"—softly.

Slade's eyes turned to the window and the snow-covered terrace without.

"Yes. I saw the book and borrowed it. I found the most significant touch in the whole case in chapter twelve."

The Doctor's eyes followed Slade's.

"The most significant touch," he murmured. "Lionel Gillespie followed his brother across half Europe, and attempted, out there in Spain, to get at one blow both the woman he wanted and the title his brother was heir to! Significant touch in that—Sir Giles never forgot it!"

"It was what steeled him to do what he did!"

Slade's calm eyes came back to the Doctor's.

The Doctor renewed his original question.

"But what of the certificate?"

"We followed it up, naturally, and found that his physician of some years back had died six months before. The certificate had been signed by the partner, Sir Samuel Mullins. Upon pressing the inquiry we discovered the facts. Sir Giles had been stabbed in the back, and for three months he was down with fever. During those three months Lionel Gillespie returned to England and married Leatrice Dane. It was after Sir Giles recovered that he bought

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the 'Terrace of the Hundred Knives.' At his father's death, when he himself returned to England, he shipped it with him. A curious memento, but he meant it to remind him for the rest of his life. It was in the old brigand fortress, as he tells, where the 'Hundred Knives' topped a parapet, that his brother tried to kill him. I should say——"

He stopped, and both men turned their heads.

The door had opened, and Sir Royston stood before them, smiling the smile of a man who is pleased with what fortune has given him.

"Well, gentlemen——" he began gaily, then caught sight of the book on Dr Bruce's knee.

Slade stepped up to him and took his arm.

"Only a friendly chat—among friends."

The baronet looked in Slade's face.

"Of course," he murmured.

Slade's fingers on his arm tightened, and then suddenly relaxed.

"I'll put it back. It was interesting reading for itself."

Sir Royston gave a little forced laugh, then switched on the light and moved across the library to the bureau. He undid the leaf and opened one of the drawers.

"Before you put the book back on the shelf, Mr Slade, I'll show you something else. Something that might prove interesting—for itself!"

Slade took the black object Sir Royston held out to him.

"A life-preserver!"

The baronet raised his eyebrows.

"I thought as much, but wasn't quite sure. They're not in my line, exactly. An interesting specimen for my private museum."

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Slade handed it back after a short examination.

"Found in the grounds?"

Sir Royston slipped the leaded stick back into the drawer and closed it.

"Yes—under my father's bedroom window."

"Mick's!"

"I presume so. The gardener found it when he was sweeping the path along that side."

Slade's face was grim.

"Thought I was noseying about too much—eh?"

The baronet shrugged his shoulders, and snipped the end from a cigar.

"Is he still convalescent?"

"Mick? Yes. He saved himself by turning round on the others. It simplified things."

"So you got the whole gang—receivers as well?"

"Brawley did—with the Squads."

"Same thing." The baronet nodded, and held a lighted match to his cigar. "While we're mentioning it—I suppose Paula told you, Mr Slade, that it was my father who saw her outside the church, when she was waiting for you that night, and that it was he who stopped the car and took her along to Rocks Dallow?"

"She told me about the car stopping, but she didn't mention Sir Giles."

"No! It was queer, wasn't it? She——"

There was a light tap on the door, and a clear voice called pleasantly:

"May I come in, gentlemen?"

Slade had one glimpse of Sir Royston's brightening face before he opened the door. Dr Bruce muttered something under his breath about talking of angels.

The detective stood back, and Lady Gillespie flashed him and Dr Bruce two ravishing smiles in turn, and crossed to her husband.

"Roy, will you do something for me?"

Slade moved to the bookshelf, and unseen slipped back the volume he had taken down. Lady Gillespie gave a happy laugh at her husband's gay rejoinder, and turned round quickly.

She saw Slade by the bookcase before he could move away.

"You've been reading, Mr Slade—eh? Well, what was it? You must only read nice things on my wedding-day, you know."

Slade smiled and inclined his head. His roving eye caught the Doctor's.

Carefully he reset the white carnation in his buttonhole.

"Oh, most assuredly, Lady Gillespie. As a matter of fact, I've been studying a book of philosophy."

"Philosophy!"—with gay dismay.

"Profound philosophy."

"Then there was a woman in it!"

All laughed heartily.

"There was," grinned Slade. "A woman who had the strange power of moving two crusted and confirmed bachelors to see her complete her conquest of a third——"

The fingers of Lady Gillespie's right hand stole to her new wedding-ring, and she threw a melting glance at the happy man by her side.

"—and both the crusted and confirmed bachelors were for the first time in their lives feeling utterly and hopelessly miserable."

"How sad!"

"It was—I assure you. For them!"

She laughed gaily, and Dr Bruce mumbled shortly:

"Speak for yourself—speak for yourself."

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"Have you ever read this book, Roy?" she challenged roguishly.

Sir Royston slipped an arm through one of hers and drew her closer to him.

"Rather!" he said, for all to hear. "I read it before Mr Slade—months before." He glanced at her tenderly. Her eyes were raised to his, filled with a wonderful light. "I'm reading it now," he whispered.

By a curious chance both Slade and Dr Bruce found their cigars drawing excellently at that moment.

